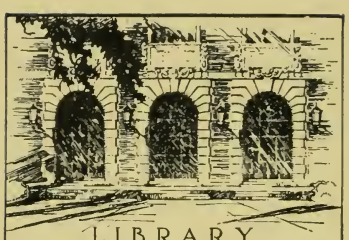

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NADINE.

VOL. I.

NADINE

The Study of a Woman.

BY

MRS. CAMPBELL PRAED,

AUTHOR OF "POLICY AND PASSION," "AN AUSTRALIAN HEROINE," ETC.

"Who can say, 'Thus far, no farther,' to the tide of his own nature?
Who can mould the spirit's fashion to the counsel of his will?
Square his being by enactment—shape his soul to legislature—
Be himself his law of living, his own art of good and ill?"

J. Brunton Stephens.

IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

CHAPMAN & HALL, LIMITED,
11, HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN.
1882.

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Bungay:
CLAY AND TAYLOR, PRINTERS

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CONTENTS OF VOLUME I.

INTRODUCTORY.

PAGE

EXTRACT FROM A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR ... 1

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

PHYSICIAN, PRIEST, OR LOVER? 11

CHAPTER II.

ON THE BRINK OF THE PRECIPICE 29

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

THE FORESHADOWING OF DRAMA 48

CHAPTER II.

A LOVER *A LA MODE* 68

CHAPTER III.

PAGE

THE HISSING OF SERPENTS 85

CHAPTER IV.

BEVIS WINS 111

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

THE BORDER-LAND OF THE INVISIBLE ... 134

CHAPTER II.

THE PHANTOM IN THE CORRIDOR 151

CHAPTER III.

THE LEGEND FULFILLED 163

CHAPTER IV.

CROXHAM DESERTED 185

NADINE.

INTRODUCTORY.

EXTRACT FROM A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR.

"A HARD frost—the most severe weather which we have known for years—has set the world sneezing, has broken up the hunting coteries, has filled the clubs with aimless loungers, has given an impetus to the sale of stalls at the theatres, increased the circulation of novels from Mudie's, and—direst of results, as regards the comfort and good-temper of a quiet, studious recluse like myself—has covered with solid ice the lake at the bottom

of my lawn, and has turned loose upon my borders a tribe of Goths and Vandals, whose shrieks of merriment pierce my unhappy ears even through stone walls and closed windows, and cause me to anticipate mournfully the approaching horrors of luncheon and five o'clock tea.

"As I sit growling in my snuggery—the only spot in the house sacred from the inroads of these barbarians—I find myself reflecting with the poet that art is long and time is fleeting, and am tempted to envy you the limpid skies and heavenly seas of the sunny south—the orange gardens and ilex groves in which you are doubtless enjoying delicious days of idleness at Pegli, and the near vicinity of the picture-galleries, the monuments, and glittering, if decayed, magnificence of Genoa.

I am tempted also, at the risk of provoking your gentle raillery, to inflict upon you one of my long letters, which you have been pleased to compare variously with the ring of cracked china, the quaint, precise harmonies of the early Italian composers, and the ponderous if polished productions of the last century essayists. But pardon me for remarking that I prefer incurring the imputation of Johnsonian pomposity to that of indulging in the slipshod English and slangy phraseology which marks the epistolary style of the 'young bloods' of the present age.

"While on the subject of poets, I am led to that particular one who has in reality inspired this letter. You will recollect— But no; I had forgotten that I was addressing

you across a chasm of three decades. The name of Harold Calderwood will, I fear, convey to your mind no more distinct image than that of several neat duodecimo volumes of airy verse, which have probably since your childhood reposed undisturbed in their allotted places upon the shelves in your father's library. They and their author were the fashion of their day, but the writer has lived longer than his works. With me the poet, gallant, wit, *raconteur*,—a star which had attained its meridian while I was still a boy, and which has now sunk completely below the literary and social horizon,—has remained always a bright and invigorating memory.

"Last week, while lounging about London, I found myself in the boudoir of our charm-

ing friend the Transatlantic Hypatia, whose kindness of heart, as you are aware, is only equalled by her passion for the society of septua- and octogenarian celebrities. Our *tête-à-tête* was cut short by the announcement of the carriage.

"'Now,' said she, 'I will reward you for having made yourself so agreeable by taking you with me to call upon the cleverest and most fascinating man in the world.'

"In faint protest I represented the inexpediency of placing my feeble flame in juxtaposition with the rays of this luminary.

"'There's something in that,' said Hypatia. 'I like modesty. But I guess that Mr. Calderwood's brilliancy is a reflection from the past, and in a short time there'll be nothing left of *his* light. If he could leap back forty

years and you twenty, you might have cause for jealousy. As it is, he is like many of your British institutions—a magnificent ruin; and I advise you strongly, if you are fortunate enough to please him, to cultivate his acquaintance, for he is fast crumbling to decay. He has brought his *chef* with him from Rome, and I can assure you, on the authority of my male friends, that no one in Europe gives more delicately composed dinners, or tells a naughty story with greater piquancy. Ah! he knows his world—as well he may do with the experience of nearly eighty years to teach him wisdom!'

"'Madam,' said I with a low bow, 'wisdom of that kind is not confined to octogenarians.'

"'But *I* am a philosopher,' murmured she.

"I found my poet what she had described him—a magnificent ruin, crippled by slow paralysis of the limbs, but not of the brain; attenuated, worn, yet with still inexhaustible vitality beaming from his eyes and flowing with his talk—a stream witty, aphoristic, epigrammatic, in which there seemed scarcely any perceptible break. He recognized me—greeted me with warmth; and I accepted an invitation to dine with him upon the following evening.

"The party was a small one—Herbert the dramatist, Knowles the metaphysician, Dr. Weldon, whom you know by renown, our host, and myself.

"We sat late. Calderwood's unflagging vivacity seemed to inspire his guests. The talk glided into literary and sociological channels. *Apropos* of a remark made by

Herbert upon the difficulty of selecting from the incidents and combinations in real life which present themselves as material to the observation of an author, such as, without shock to conventional purism, may be exhibited upon the stage, individual reminiscences and experiences of the tragic and sensational kind gathered thickly. Almost each one present had some harrowing tale to relate which had come under his personal knowledge, and the improbabilities of reality as compared with those of imagination were freely discussed.

"Some melodramatic and morbidly exciting situations were depicted by Dr. Weldon with the graphic force of an eye-witness, and their recital was followed by a remark of Calderwood's.

"'I think that I can cap that narrative, Doctor, interesting as it is. Herbert, I will give you the materials for an emotional drama, which at least possesses the merit of being absolute fact. I can vouch for the truth of what I am going to tell you; but I must beg that you will not exact chapter and verse of my authority. The heroine of the romance died several years ago. She was well known in European courts, and though I fancy most of you would be considerably astonished were I to reveal her name, in relating some incidents in her career, I am violating no confidence, and running no risk of betrayals injurious to any living person.'

"Calderwood then proceeded with his story. As I know that fact and fiction are to you equally fascinating, and that no gift

could be more acceptable to you than the skeleton of a plot, I send you this one. Ere long I shall look for its appearance, clothed in flesh, reanimated, and dressed after modern taste; but let me give you a word of advice. Do not delay in the execution of your projects. Herbert is deeply pondering the solution of certain delicate and technical difficulties, and is quoting the Greek tragedy as a magnificent precedent for realism upon the English stage."

* * * * * *

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

PHYSICIAN, PRIEST, OR LOVER?

"And so you think that I have changed of late—since my visit to the Dormers in London. How?"

The question was asked in a tone half arch, half melancholy, by a handsome girl seated before the pianoforte in a dim, old-fashioned, country drawing-room, and was addressed to a gentleman who, bending forward with his eyes fixed attentively upon her face, had been speaking in a low tone under cover of the music.

Not that there was any need to drown their voices. The only other occupant of the room, the girl's father, leaned back in a deep arm-chair, his fine profile outlined against the sombre upholstery, his gouty hands folded across each other, while he slept the sleep of the aged.

It was nine in the evening. The curtains were drawn, and a log blazed in the fire-place. Wind howled without; the boughs of the beech-trees creaked, and though it was late in April, rainy sleet was driven against the window-panes. Within, the harmoniously tinted room adorned by vases of hot-house flowers, the many traces of feminine taste, the warm atmosphere scented with *pot-pourri*, were grateful to the senses and suggestive of all that is refined, tender, sympathetic.

Dr. Bramwell, so was named the gentleman by the piano, fancied that he detected a ring of emotion in Nadine Senguin's voice. Her tone seemed to challenge truth; her whole manner, he thought, was tinged by something at once defiant and appealing, artificial and yet deeply earnest. But he was in love, and to him Miss Senguin was a mystery as subtle as it was sweet.

Not the kind of man to grapple with mystery in the form of a beautiful woman. Dr. Julian Bramwell, aged twenty-eight, in appearance heavy-browed, contemplative-looking; in face, square of conformation, and rather plain than handsome; had dealt all his life with the positive and knowable, and though he possessed a fair share of idealism, could not be said to have brought it under

cultivation. It was not his tendency to put out feelers in emotional directions, or to glide gracefully over surface interests. Life was to him a serious business; his moods inclined to pessimism, while his soul burned to alleviate distress. He was talented and ambitious, and cherished visions of scientific discovery, of fame and—a secondary consideration—fortune. He had a clear, logical mind, the capacity for conceiving and carrying out a fixed purpose, and a strong faith in himself. This was fairly justified. He could walk between narrow lines, and if impulse ever prompted him to overstep them, he had the power of self-restraint. He believed himself to be a keen student of human nature. Success in diagnosis had thrown him into the error of over self-confidence. He was mistaken in imagining that

he understood Nadine Senguin. For that, he felt too deeply. Her blushes, smiles, transient humours furnished him with food for deep thought, and usually led him to conclusions graver than they apparently warranted, and most often erroneous. It is easier to read character by physiognomy while counting the beats of a patient's pulse, than to interpret the manner of a woman who knows herself beloved, while gazing into a pair of liquid eyes, that melt imperceptibly from grey to violet, and unconsciously magnetize the would-be magnetizer. These self-same orbs were full and soft, with deep lids, and strongly arched brows which imparted to the countenance an expression at once piquant and wistful. The forehead was low and broad, the nose straight and fine, the chin slightly pointed,

too short for oval English beauty; the lips mobile—when smiling sweet, but melancholy in repose; the head sleek and small, with dusky hair, neither black nor brown, coiled on the nape of a slender neck; the complexion was of a warm paleness, the whole colouring nondescript, hues blending into each other and producing an impression distinctly harmonious; while the face was relieved from the faintest suggestion of insipidity by an almost startling variety of expression. Miss Senguin's figure was slight, but tall and singularly supple. In her manner there was sufficient sadness blended with vivacity to pique curiosity; her voice was low, and her speech, even when she talked commonplace, had the peculiarity of arousing interest and conjecture.

"Well!" she asked, ceasing in her playing

for a moment and looking at him full. "In what way have I changed?"

He hesitated.

"It is but natural that you should have gained in grace, brilliancy, self-possession. The consciousness of admiration must, I should imagine, have this effect upon a woman so young as you. But that is not what I mean: the alteration is more subtle. It is difficult to define what is indefinable. Your manner was always variable; now it is more so than ever; sometimes, indeed, I fancy that you have a cause for trouble which is a secret to the world. The thought grieves me deeply. Yet underlying everything, there is a softness, a tenderness which—" He paused for a moment. "This makes me happy; I hardly know why. I think that I can express in one

word what I want to convey. You are more *sympathique.*"

"*You* find me so?"

"Is it presumptuous to answer—yes?"

"No. I am in a strange humour. You are right in calling me variable. I give you free permission to say to me this evening what you choose."

"Do you know, Miss Senguin, what that permission implies?".

He spoke meaningly, and bending forward tried to meet her eyes, while he lightly touched her right hand, which again drew music from the keys of the piano.

She did not at once reply, then said slowly—

"Perhaps I can guess. But I warn you that I am in a 'mood' to-night, and not responsible for my words or my manner. Do

not blame me, Dr. Bramwell, if you receive false impressions. I don't wish to give them, but—this is the truth—I do not understand myself."

"There cannot be any question of false impressions," he said energetically. "If you were less simple, less frank, you would in all ways have more confidence in the beauty of your own nature."

"Then I may feel that everything we say to each other is 'without prejudice'? Do you know that you produce in me an impulsive reliance upon you which makes me wish to judge of myself by your opinion of me?"

"If that were the case," he answered with repressed passion, "you would see nothing in your own character but what is noble and lovable."

"Ah me! It would be well if you could put your spectacles upon the eyes of others. Not that one would care to be examined critically or even approvingly by everybody in the world, but it is elevating to the character to be thought better of than it deserves. For one thing, if all persons believed one to be pure and good there would be no possibility of being tempted. . . . You doctors have a great many physical theories about germs," she added in a tone of forced gaiety. "Do you believe, morally speaking, that the seeds of evil can lie latent in a person's nature for years, and then be suddenly developed in a month—a day—by something, some one, outside oneself, so that one's very temperament is reversed, and one is borne on a tide of longing towards what is evil? . . .

And the strange thing is, that one is almost persuaded it is not evil, but a righteous murdering of instincts, which seem to be the fruit of perhaps a false idea of morality."

She had begun lightly, but as she concluded, her lips trembled, her voice grew deeply earnest.

"I wish that you would speak plainly," exclaimed Dr. Bramwell, anxiously. "What do you mean?"

"Only this. Do you think it possible that a woman, say a girl like me, could become suddenly depraved in mind?"

"Depraved! Nadine! how can you use such a word in connection with yourself—you who are the embodiment of truth and purity? It is wrong of you to say such things; I

cannot bear to hear them. I will not discuss such a possibility."

Miss Senguin's head drooped. She stopped playing again, and timidly touched his arm.

"You see it is impossible for us, in a mental sense, to face each other fairly. We are too different. I know that you haven't any faith in angels or devils or anything else supernatural. I have a strong one. I am morbidly superstitious, and I have a fancy that at times one's good and evil genii have the power of personifying themselves in particular individuals. Well, Dr. Bramwell, I am inclined to think that *you* are my good genius at present. When I am with you, morbid impulses and wicked thoughts become unreal or grimly laughable. My nature seems to find something which it needs, in yours. There's not

the least element of personal attraction in this feeling; I almost wish there were. I am very honest with you, even at the risk of your thinking me unwomanly. What does it matter? What does anything matter? But one goes through phases of experience in which one feels the most intense need of help. It is so with me now. Do not, however, misunderstand me. There is nothing definite that I can confide to you. You can best help me by taking no notice of my mood, by letting me say what is passing through my mind, without attaching too great importance to my words. You say that I am variable. Think that I am this evening what I shall not be tomorrow, what I shall perhaps never be again. I want a figurative handclasp. Sympathy—the knowledge that some one whose judgment

we respect cares for us, and expects good from us, is, when we are tossed about and troubled and uncertain of ourselves, the greatest help . . . But—why should I speak? —Dr. Bramwell, do you think, that I am looking well?"

"Oh! say what is in your mind! No, you do not look well now. When I came this evening you seemed to me full of brightness, but at this moment your eyes are heavy and your face is almost haggard."

"That is not surprising. All last night I lay awake. I do so during many nights. It is wretched work: every sound jars my nerves; my head throbs, and the same weary thoughts fly round and round in my brain. I am afraid of opium: it makes me dream, and dreams are the mockery of reality. I am

afraid of a great many things, but I am most of all afraid of myself."

"Nadine," cried Dr. Bramwell, "you bid me take no notice of your words; but how is that possible? All this is new to me. You do not know how you distress me. You are unhappy, and I yearn to comfort you, if I might—if I dared. I beseech you to place confidence in me. You have said already that instinctively your nature turns for support to mine. Ah, you cannot realize how happy those words have made me. But what I feel is nothing. . . . I only wish you to know that all I ask is to serve you. I am convinced that your mind is preyed upon by some inward morbid exaggeration of outward circumstance, which will cease to affect you painfully when you can disburthen yourself

of it to another. Tell me—Is your trouble in any way connected with your visit to the Dormers?"

Nadine bent involuntarily, as it were, towards him, began to speak, then hesitated. Anxiety showed itself in her eyes as their searching, melancholy gaze met that of his; doubt and irresolution were upon her parted lips. A struggle was waging within her. . . . Suddenly, the flicker of impulse died out of her face and left it cold and still. He felt intuitively that a look, a gesture,—on his part unconscious,—had arrested speech on hers.

"Nadine!" he exclaimed imploringly.

His voice seemed to recall her to herself. She shook her head mournfully.

"No," she murmured, not in answer to his question, but as if replying to one which had

presented itself to her own mind; then added, with what appeared to be an affectation of indifference, "I am going next week to stay with the Dormers for the Chollerton races. I hear that you also are to be there."

"Nadine," cried Bramwell impetuously, "you are not true to yourself—or to me. How can I convince you of my entire longing to help you—how convey to you the devotion, the worship that is within my heart? My deepest sympathy is yours—and more, far more, if you will have it so. Speak to me. Let me know what is grieving you. Something tells me that when we meet at Croxham it will be too late, and the impulse to confide in me will have passed away."

Nadine smiled with sad bitterness.

"You are right. When we meet at Crox-

ham *it may be too late.* . . . No. Do not urge me further. You cannot help me; I will not ask you to try. I need a priest more than a doctor—if I could believe in the priest! My trouble lies in myself, and is caused by my own nature. Why should I struggle against irresistible bent? . . . . What you say is true. My feelings are morbid. They are unreal, and must be dealt with as one deals with phantoms. Let us talk no more of my imaginary griefs: you would be the first to attribute them to an over-excited condition of the nervous system. Tell me something of yourself."

"To speak of myself is to talk of *you.* My life is bound up in yours. I have no hope for the future apart from you. You know this. . . . Nadine, you *know* that I love you."

CHAPTER II.

ON THE BRINK OF THE PRECIPICE.

NADINE raised her hands with a shrinking gesture.

"Do not tell me of this—not now."

"Yes, *now*," cried Bramwell vehemently. "I came this evening for no other purpose and it is impossible, Nadine, that this can be a surprise to you."

"Ah! Have I the power of reading thoughts? . . . No. You deserve frankness. I did suspect it. But I knew that it is your *métier* to study character; and I might

have supposed your interest in me to be partly scientific. You are rather cold-blooded, Dr. Bramwell."

"*Am* I cold-blooded? How little you know me!"

He bent suddenly close to her, and his eyes glowed upon hers.

"Do not awaken papa. He is sleeping so quietly, dreaming his happy dreams of old-world fables, inspired perhaps by a new religion or a new mystical philosophy. Who would not cast off all ties with the present if they could — and live in the past?"

"Nadine," said Dr. Bramwell, more gently, "if you had reason for thinking me cold and self-contained, it is that my position with regard to your father, and the almost daily

contact with you, into which it brought me, obliged me to place a strong guard upon my feelings. A doctor is not on the same footing as an ordinary acquaintance."

"No; and it is partly upon that account that I have talked to you so frankly, and have come to lean upon you."

"It was a false position," replied Bramwell, "and every time your clear eyes met mine I felt it more keenly. Now I have put an end to it, and I can speak. My dearest hope is to win you for my wife. I know that I could make you happy. I love you passionately. In time my love would compel yours. I am certain of this. You have admitted that there is sympathy between our natures. In your case, it would become something stronger; nay, but for your maidenly reserve it might now

be love. I speak in all reverence: you are sacred to me; but we are face to face now as man and woman. I meant to speak to-night. I meant that we should stand fairly to each other. I do not wish for any definite promise from you. Of course there is disparity. I would not ask you to share my lot unless I had something better to offer you than that of a country doctor's wife. I have given up my practice here and am going to London. Through my writings I have already gained some sort of repute. I am ambitious, and I feel in me the elements of success. I *will* succeed for the sake of winning you. In a short time I shall not be ashamed to come to you boldly. Now, I ask nothing, unless it be a word, bidding me either hope or despair utterly."

Miss Senguin's only answer was a plaintive chord that preluded a wistful melody.

"Do you know this?" she asked.

"It is something of Schumann's, is it not?" he answered impatiently.

"Träumerei. Dreams," she said in a melancholy tone, "idle fancy! But dreaming is pleasant, even though we know that there must be sorrowful awakening."

A sense of blankness and desolation fell with her words upon Dr. Bramwell.

"Are my hopes then only dreams?" he asked bitterly. "Must I go away despairing?"

"Do not either despair or hope," she replied. "Wait. Leave me in peace for a little while, till I see where fate means to strand me."

"Tell me," he said. "Is there any other

man whom you love, and who wishes to marry you?"

She did not answer immediately, then said with a forced laugh—

"There is not any one in the world whom I love—and who wishes to marry me."

"Then I am content," said Dr. Bramwell. "I see light in the future."

"Don't deceive yourself. Don't build plans upon me. You know that I am a person of moods. I am not to be depended upon. There are two creatures within me fighting against each other, and no one can say which will conquer. It would be better if you believed me vain and heartless; better that you should wean yourself from loving me. If you will not, or cannot, you must accept the consequences. If it is my fate to make you

unhappy I too shall suffer; but at least I shall have warned you."

"You talk as though it were possible to choose whom one would or would not love. It is happiness to me to think of you, even though it be sadly; and to try and wean myself from you would be to tear away a part of my being."

"Would you still find happiness in loving me, though you knew that I could never be yours?"

"Do not bid me believe that. I cannot—I will not. But even if it were so—yes."

"Then be happy," said Nadine with a bewitching smile. "But," she added, "I have a bargain to make with you—a selfish, one-sided bargain. I will accept your love and be grateful, and—yes, I will *try* to return

it; but it must be on condition that you do not tell me of it, at least till—"

"Till I am in a position to claim you for my own," interrupted Bramwell triumphantly.

"No, that is taking things far too much for granted. Say till—if such a day ever comes—I confide in you freely. Dr. Bramwell, I bid you think the worst of me that you can. If I obeyed my better self I would send you away and tell you to forget me. Think of me as heartless and selfish, as unwilling to lose your admiration,—if you prefer the word,—your sympathy, or what is more true, loth to deprive myself of the good which I gain from your belief in me. . . . Oh, I am sacrificing you to my wandering impulses! What shall I do? Tell me what to do."

"To serve you at any cost would be no sacrifice."

He bent till his lips touched her hand. She shivered slightly and drew it gently away. Then compunction seized her, and she allowed her fingers to rest for an instant upon his, in a caress that she might have bestowed upon a faithful dog.

"I think that you would be very loyal," she murmured—"more loyal than I deserve. But at Croxham next month you will not let any one suspect an understanding of this sort. You must not single me out, or be aggrieved if you see me monopolized by other men."

"I shall only be at Croxham for a few days. I should not have accepted Mrs. Dormer's invitation had it not been for the temptation of meeting you there. Miss Senguin, your

wishes shall be respected, and after to-night my love shall be silent."

"You are very good to me," said Nadine earnestly. "You have always been good to me since that day when I thought papa was dying, and you comforted me. . . . Life is very difficult," she went on in a dreamy tone. "It seems a perpetual struggle of what 'is' against what 'might have been.' Circumstance shapes not only our fate, but ourselves. If some one or something were different then we might be either better or worse. That is what is so hard. A little earlier—a little later—never at all. It is all a throw of the die. . . . You look very mournful. Does what I say distress you?"

"It would give me the deepest pain," answered Dr. Bramwell gravely, "were it not

that, in spite of your half-repulse, I still hope one day to possess the key to your thoughts. You are very complex. A few months ago I thought that I understood you; to-night, I am further from doing so than if I had met you for the first time yesterday."

"And does not that thought depress and deter you?"

"No; for to me you are the noblest, truest woman living, and I *will* win your heart."

"My heart! Oh, I am cruel, false—all that is most base. I must say this; it relieves me. I have no healthy, emotional impulses. I should make a bad wife, an indifferent mother. And even in fighting against the evil within me I am calculating, I am capable of anything—capable even of marrying you as a refuge from myself. . . . Don't look so

horrified and bewildered," she added in a different tone. "You mustn't think that I really mean all the wild things I say. It amuses me; it is a safety-valve. I am very wayward. I dare say that you find me perplexing, but you must consider how lonely I am; there's no one to whom I can open my mind. I have only papa in the world, and, poor dear! I would suffer anything rather than that he should be worried by my whims and vagaries. I always had a feeling, Dr. Bramwell, that you would in some way be mixed up with my life. Perhaps for that reason I have talked to you so oddly and impulsively. It would be foolish to take my confessions too seriously. I had theories about you. I felt a strong desire to verify them; but the worst of being interested in

people is that one is always wanting to make experiments, and to do or say something utterly untrue, but which, by means of their interpretation of it, would throw a new light upon their character. . . ."

At this moment a gentle movement in the arm-chair announced that the sleeper had returned to consciousness. Miss Senguin plunged abruptly into a rather difficult concerto, by Handel, which lay open on the music-desk. It was the signal for Dr. Bramwell to rise, while Mr. Senguin straightened himself and stirred his cold coffee, trying to make believe that he had not been asleep.

"Your music is very pretty, Nadine. I missed it in the evenings when you were away, and should have felt lonely indeed if this good doctor had not sometimes taken

compassion on me. Not that I would for the world keep you buried here. Young people must have their chances of making the best they can out of life. Go on playing, my love; and, Bramwell, what do you say if we have our game of *écarté?*"

Dr. Bramwell acquiesced. The card-table was set out, and presently both gentlemen were seated at it, while Nadine continued at the piano. As he shuffled the cards Mr. Senguin's eyes wandered towards his daughter with a glance of admiration, and his head nodded in time to the crisp, stately measure.

"How do you think she is looking?" he asked, but fortunately did not wait for a reply. "Improved in appearance, eh? but her spirits seem to me a little variable. Naturally so. London even in winter is a

more exciting place than Alston. I have been reproaching myself, Doctor, for not sending Nadine to town in the season. You should have heard Mrs. Dormer's views upon the subject; she has offered to chaperone her this year. Hitherto I have selfishly thought only of my own present comfort, and have not considered her future; but that must not go on. I should like to see her well married before I die. There! I had almost forgotten to mark the king. . . . Mrs. Dormer, oh yes, she was over here yesterday with a sort of distant connection, Colonel Halkett. He is staying at Croxham. . . . Dear me! how many years that name carries me back. I was his father's fag at Eton, and we were in the embassy together at St. Petersburg. Regie Halkett was my best man. Of course

you are aware that my wife was a Russian. It sometimes strikes me that a certain peculiarity of temperament which you may have observed in Nadine is inherited from her mother. Time passes. Halkett married some years afterwards, and this is his eldest son—a handsome fellow in the Blues; but there is a queer story about *his* wife. She went mad after the birth of their first child, and is in confinement, I am told. A melancholy way of being handicapped; but it is said that he has his consolations. . . . I win the trick. You never proposed, so I mark two. The Dormers have a large party on the sixth for the Chollerton races. I hear that you are to be there: your farewell, I suppose, to your old friends. Nadine goes next week, and I am left to the fate of the

old and infirm—solitude. However, I don't grumble. And so your successor has arrived. Bring him over soon and introduce him; and, for Heaven's sake, Bramwell, go thoroughly into my case with him. How I shall exist when you leave us, I really cannot imagine. The position is too terrible to be contemplated."

Nadine abruptly ceased playing and advanced to the fireplace. Here she stood without speaking, one arm resting upon the oak mantleshelf, her forehead shaded by her hand.

Shifting his position a few moments later, Bramwell had an opportunity of observing her face as it was reflected in the mirror opposite him. She was apparently gazing at her own image, but in her eyes there was

a look of melancholy, almost of despair, so intense that it startled him. He involuntarily uttered her name and recalled her to herself.

"Your expression alarmed me," he said apologetically. "The lamp threw a ghastly shade upon your face. I fancied that you might be ill."

Miss Senguin met his glance of troubled inquiry with one of her doubtful smiles.

"No; I was only thinking. . . . Dreaming," she added mournfully, "dreams of the future, in which one sometimes sees warning ghosts. . . . Ah, papa," she continued, with a sudden animation, "you don't know how superstitious the Dormers have made me! Henceforth your spiritualistic *séances*, your mediums, and your astrological studies shall be sacred from my ridicule. I intend to

bring you back a perfect *repertoire* of ghost stories from Croxham. There is a mysterious white lady who walks the central corridor, and there are unearthly sounds and unaccountable lights, all of which I mean seriously to investigate. Dr. Bramwell, you are an inveterate sceptic, but in the interests of science I shall call upon you for your co-operation."

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

THE FORESHADOWING OF DRAMA.

Dr. Bramwell did not see Miss Senguin again before her departure for Croxham, to which hospitable abode she had been bidden a week earlier than the less intimate friends who were invited for the Chollerton Races.

The Dormers were seldom at any time alone, and besides her host's family, Nadine found at Croxham, Colonel Halkett, the gentleman spoken of by Mr. Senguin to Dr. Bramwell; Miss Curtis, a handsome, indolent heiress, the niece of Mrs. Dormer, whom the

latter—plain, clever, charming, and slightly satirical—catalogued to Nadine as follows:—"My dear, she is a small soul oppressed by a large body. One feels quite a sympathy for the over-weight of fine flesh. She won't bore us. She may stay five days and she may stay five weeks. It depends upon how the supply of French novels holds out. I have taken care to lay in a stock from Rolandi's, and have directed her attention to the most springy arm-chair in the house. She is a beautiful piece of furniture which eats, and has a weakness for truffles;" Mrs. Bartelotte, commonly called Clem Bartelotte, a pretty, vivacious American, with her husband, a travelled gentleman of varied accomplishment, which ranged between a facility for deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics and for taking

successfully the stiffest Leicestershire bull-finches; a young diplomatist who knew everybody and everything, and who was suspected of admiration for Nadine, and serious designs upon Miss Curtis; and finally, Mr. Jem Ormthwaite, a north-country squire, who had been discovered a short time before by Harry Dormer in the act of gazing disconsolately into the Serpentine, and upon being asked what he was doing, replied grimly, "Waiting for November," whereupon Mr. Dormer represented that Chollerton Races might be a poor but temporary substitute for fox-hunting, and carried him off in triumph to Croxham.

The party was small enough for sociability, and sufficiently large to subdivide conveniently into twos upon occasions. Croxham was a charming country house full of

resources, so close to London that it was well in the world, and offered workers or pleasure-seekers agreeable opportunities for running down to dinner and returning by a well-timed midnight train. Mrs. Dormer was Catholic in her tastes and Bohemian in her proclivities; and she was one of the few hostesses who contrive to amalgamate successfully the country element with that of London life.

There was a sense of freedom in the atmosphere; cigarettes were tolerated in most places, and conversation always flowed freely, even verging sometimes on innocent laxity. A good deal of money was lost and won in the evenings at loo and poker. Flirtation, which might have been considered compromising, was accepted in good faith. "*Honi soit qui mal y pense*" represented Mrs.

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Dormer's social creed, and frisky matrons, well known on the Promenade des Anglais, and familiar with Monte Carlo, found ample opportunities for diversion during the spring and autumn gaieties at Croxham.

At the present crisis, this freedom from restraint and absence of ill-natured comment or disagreeable suspicion was particularly grateful to Nadine Senguin. Her temperament possessed all the Slavonic pliability. She seemed to have cast aside those tragic forebodings at which she had hinted in her conversation with Dr. Bramwell, and had assumed, with her pretty London gowns, a reckless vivacity of manner which rendered her the very life of the party. A demon of restlessness appeared to have entered into her; it was as though she found silence and

solitude insupportable even for an hour. She rode and walked a good deal with her host and with Colonel Halkett. She entered with eagerness into Mrs. Dormer's plans for entertaining her guests—romped with the children, played lively music, and sang gay French songs with the *entrain* of a *vivandière,* chattered to Mrs. Bartelotte, and except at the rare moments when her body was still and her face in repose, looked as though she had not a care to cloud her girlish levity.

The Chollerton Races were to take place on the seventh and eighth of May, and on the afternoon of the sixth all the party, with the exception of Dr. Bramwell, who was momentarily expected, were assembled in the hall at Croxham, where Mrs. Dormer, looking particularly quaint and original in her trim

serge costume, was pouring out tea, and with the tact which made her so popular, was doing her best to remove the slight stiffness that so often follows the arrival of a bevy of strangers.

The hall at Croxham was an attractive lounging-place, and was more frequently occupied than any other room in the house. Now, though it was broad daylight without, and the scent of lilac and narcissus floated in through one open window, a blazing log surmounted the great heap of white ashes upon the hearth, and the bright reflections from the antique silver tea-service, the steaming muffins upon their brass tripod before the fire, and the presence of two lazy-looking dackshunds curled up upon the hearthrug, seemed more in harmony with a touch of

rawness in the air than with any preconceived notions of our merry month of May.

The dark panelled walls, hung with family portraits and ornamented with china plaques and old willow-patterned dishes; the sombrely-tinted screens and tapestry *portières;* the oak bookcases, and dusky recesses lighted with vivid spots of colour, in the shape of some gorgeous, quaintly-fashioned vase from the East, some antique brazen shield, rich piece of bric-a-brac or stand of azaleas or calceolarias, formed an harmonious background to the scattered groups. It was a charming scene, rendered doubly so by the living element of attractive women and men, possessing more or less the air of distinction which good breeding imparts. All were talking—the elder gentlemen somewhat apart,

their deep tones, as they discussed sport or politics, contrasting with the ladies' milder voices, and with the not unmelodious twang of Mrs. Bartelotte, who, attired in the most 'fetching' of tea gowns, leaned back in a basket-chair, with her pretty, pert face turned towards Mr. Ormthwaite, while she stroked the golden hair of Mrs. Dormer's little girl of three. Mrs. Bartelotte had a way of rippling on about nothing in particular, which filled up pauses; and as her discourse was accompanied by much graceful gesticulation, it was agreeable to eye and ear.

"Well, I must say I do admire children, they're so round and soft, and their dimples are so 'cute. You should see my baby, Mrs. Dormer; she's real lovely. I intend to have her portrait painted. I wish you'd tell me

of a young artist that's going to be a celebrity; it's always best to catch them young. I thought I had discovered a treasure the other day. He was an Italian. His name was Count Dam'mi. It sounds like an objurgation, don't it, Mr. Ormthwaite? He had a title as long as my arm, and I assure you that was the shortest part of it. I wasn't going to lose sight of him, so I took him all the way from Rome to Freckenham. Gerald said that if I chose to buy him a new suit of clothes, and half-a-dozen shirts, and pay his washing-bills, I might keep him. I guess he was dear at the price, that Count. I must say he wasn't a success. Gerald thought he'd show him something of English country life, and took him out shooting. He had a passion for improving his mind; I will

say that for Count Dam'mi. You should have seen his get-up: he turned out armed like a desperado. I'm sure I don't know what he expected; but I must say he wasn't altogether pleased. This is what he remarked when he came back. You must just imagine a creature like a shrimp, with beady black eyes and an imperial." Mrs. Bartelotte executed a little pantomimic description. "'I do not onderstand ze way ze English gentlemen make sport. Zey shoot ze little birds; *I* shoot ze brigands.' I calculate," added Mrs. Bartelotte reflectively, "there was nothing paltry about *his* ideas. . . . Now, Colonel Halkett, there isn't the least use in your eyeing a certain young lady in that savage fashion, for she is appropriated already, so come and give me the straight tip for the

Chollerton Cup, for I've got to replenish my purse after all my losses at poker."

Nadine Senguin, the object of Mrs. Bartelotte's observation, was seated in a window recess at the further end of the room. Her gaze was fixed upon the carriage-drive, which from her position she commanded. She looked feverish and excited. Upon each cheek glowed a spot of carmine. Her lips were parted in an artificial smile, but her eyes wore a melancholy expression, and she turned an abstracted ear to the conversation of her companion, a small, sandy-whiskered man, one of Mrs. Dormer's gifted *protégés*, whose claims to social consideration rested upon the practice of palmistry and a general proficiency in such-like recondite arts; and who had now launched himself upon a stream

of discourse tending towards his favourite topics.

"You don't remember me, Miss Senguin; that was not to be expected; but *I* have seen you. Do you recollect a conversazione at the South Kensington, and a lecture upon 'Physiognomical Diversities in European Races' given by Deodatus Lumley? Imagine an existence weighted by the name of Deodatus! Don't you pity me? You were there with Mrs. Dormer and Colonel Halkett. I have a keen eye for faces that are out of the common. Yours puzzled me, for I could not at first determine your nationality. Oh, I know all about it now. You are half Russian. Mrs. Dormer enlightened me; but not before my inner consciousness had evolved the fact from your voice and appearance."

Miss Senguin turned her face towards Mr. Lumley, her eyebrows delicately elevated, a faint gleam of interest in her eyes.

"The feminine Russian type," continued he, didactically, "is at once languorous and *spirituelle,* passionate and cold, impulsive and subtle. All these characteristics foretoken drama in life."

"Ah, drama is pleasant!" murmured Nadine.

"You will make it. I see tragedy shadowed forth in your nostrils. Do not dilate them so scornfully, Miss Senguin. Let me refer you to Lavater for information on that point; and to go further, I have not the least doubt that the testimony of your nose will be confirmed by the lines of your palm."

Nadine, with a gesture of curiosity,

tendered her slim and exquisitely-shaped hand, upon which glittered several valuable rings. Mr. Lumley took it within his own, turned it over, and, while examining it with apparent minuteness, continued talking in his serio-comic manner.

"To a student of pathognomy, Miss Senguin, the hand is a book which contains the secrets of human nature; no line or curve, no mound or indenture is without significance. The shape of a finger-nail may determine belief. Success or failure, the struggles of ambition, the pangs of defeat may be read on this little elevation," and he lightly touched the edge of Nadine's palm. "Destiny speaks in the line descending from the second finger, and the workings of the heart are revealed in this chain-like tracing,

which, alas! tells of emotional ebbings and flowings, of instability of attachment, pain inflicted, loyalty ill-requited. Ah me! a melancholy record. Do you shrink? Shall I continue?"

"Pray go on," said Nadine, her egotism piqued; "but you generalize too much. Tell me something more definite."

"You have a clear intellect, too much in subjection to your impulses for your safety or peace of mind. You are now, or shortly will be, dominated by a passion that will materially affect the course of your life."

Nadine started, and looked keenly at the fortune-teller, but his eyes were fixed intently upon her palm. She answered in a tone of raillery—

"And yet you say that I am inconstant."

"True; but in this case— Do you really wish to know what I see?"

Nadine nodded.

"Passion is arrested almost in the hour of consummation by sudden death."

The gravity of Mr. Lumley's manner produced a strong effect upon Miss Senguin. She turned very pale and half withdrew her hand.

"Not your own death," he added, reassuringly. "A prosperous marriage, health, and long life are promised you. Was I not right? Your nature *does* present the elements of drama. But you need not fear personal disaster; you will be in peril, but you will escape from it. I am not altogether a prophet of evil. Your line of Saturn points to a brilliant career; here is denoted the

favour of princes. Wealth and social distinction will be yours."

"And happiness?" asked Nadine, "for it seems to me that your bag of blessings is weighted by curses."

"Ah, happiness! That is indeed hard to define. Who is happy? Shall you be happy on the box seat of Dormer's drag to-morrow, even though you know yourself to be the envy of professional beauties, and are certain of an invitation to the Blues' ball? There will be an east wind, or you will have the wrong person beside you," added Mr Lumley, plaintively. "There always is an east wind in life, except when one wants it to keep bores away."

Nadine laughed nervously. The sound of carriage-wheels without attracted her eyes

to the window; but again her gaze drooped towards her lap, and she appeared lost in contemplation of the hand which no longer rested in that of Mr. Lumley. It was only a fly laden with luggage that had driven round to the side entrance. She did not speak for a few moments; her attention had wandered.

Mr. Lumley observed her abstraction, and rattled on with commendable tact.

"What a delightful old hall this is, especially at this hour! It is the fashion with our neighbours across the Channel to ridicule the Anglo tea mania, but it has certainly an element of the picturesque. Five o'clock tea, charming faces, old oak, faded tapestry, and blue China,—all the accessories complete for a genre picture,—and a faint

suggestion of ghostly presence in the background. The soul of an æsthete could not more desire. Here's Halkett, Miss Senguin, making for you with a tea-cup in one hand and a cream-jug in the other. His mission in life is to amuse, and as *I* am not even interesting you,—your eyes are more truthful than your lips,—I'll give him my chair, and go and make myself useful in carrying about the muffins."

CHAPTER II.

A LOVER *A LA MODE*.

Colonel Halkett might have posed as a nineteenth century hero of that now familiar type which combines the muscular with the sentimental. Capacity for all the finer emotions did not in his case appear incompatible with proficiency in every manly pursuit. One could have foretold that women would find him an irresistible suitor, and men an excellent boon companion. He was tall and spare, with straight features, a blonde moustache, and fierce, melancholy eyes, which seemed

now to seek a return glance from those of Miss Senguin; but, strange to say, she hardly looked up as he approached, nor did she address him any word of thanks when she accepted the cup of tea which he had brought her.

He seated himself in the chair which Mr. Lumley had vacated.

"Why do you watch the carriage-drive?" he asked. "Are you expecting any one?"

"Yes. There is another guest still to arrive."

"Some one in whom you are interested? Happy person!"

"It would be more true to say that he is interested in me," replied Nadine, smiling artificially.

"Ah!" said Colonel Halkett; "a gentle-

man! That makes all the difference. I retract my exclamation. He has my pity."

Their glances met: hers full, troubled, vaguely fearful; his deep-set, fiery, with the faintest element of mastery.

"I give you false impressions," said Nadine, bending forward and speaking impulsively. "My regard for Dr. Bramwell—you know, I have spoken to you of him—is really strong, only it is abstract, not personal. His feelings, his hopes, his future are no great concern of mine. If he were unhappy I should be sorry, but it would not touch me deeply. Oh! I am ashamed of being so cold-blooded. . . . But it is true that he influences me powerfully; and his influence has usually the disagreeable effect of making me miserable. Do you know why? His greatest weakness is in believing

me good. . . . Ah!" she added, and her eyes seemed to shine through tears, "what a mockery it is to talk of free will when one considers how entirely we are at the mercy of circumstances which we do not make, and of people who master us whether we will have it so or not."

"No," said Colonel Halkett, "we are mastered by our own emotions, passions—all within ourselves that makes life positive and worth the living. This is not a bondage to be mourned, but the happy servitude of higher natures which frees them from the galling chain of circumstance; if with it there is sometimes pain and rebellion, does it not bring also the most exquisite bliss?"

"You call it so? It seems to me that joy is born in the death-throes of all that is best

in our nature. And what is left? What follows? This is the thing I want to know. This is the thought which haunts me."

At that moment Dr. Bramwell was announced. His grave presence, the square, heavy brow, dark, thoughtful eyes, and air of reserve and preoccupation, seemed in a vague but apparent manner to affect the whole party. Those with whom he was acquainted smiled upon his entrance, after a fashion less conventional than their wont; and the strangers watched with an expression of awakened interest the approach of a man whose lately published investigations in certain imperfectly explored fields of mental physiology, had attracted the attention of the College of Physicians, and had caused his name to be quoted in such popular and scientific journals

as might be found upon the drawing-room tables of the fashionable world. As he advanced, Mrs. Dormer rose, greeting him warmly. The eyes of both Miss Senguin and Colonel Halkett followed his movements, and the latter remarked,—

"So that is the man who you say exercises a queer sort of moral influence over you. He prescribes for your mental as well as your physical ailments—a convenient combination of the functions of priest and doctor. It is a curious fancy of yours. . . . I wish," he exclaimed in low, earnest tones, "that I could draw you out of this current of morbid, exciting thought, which is poisoning for you all the sweetness of life."

"Do you think that it becomes *you* to reproach me because—?"

She hesitated; her eyes drooped, and a faint colour rose to her cheeks.

"Because you have come to me, like an angel to one in despair, and have taught me the meaning of happiness?"

"No, no, no. Because I can never be again the girl Dr. Bramwell now imagines me to be."

"Why will you not believe that you are one of those women by whom men are redeemed?" whispered Colonel Halkett, passionately—"the women who win honour and devotion by noble self-surrender."

"Honeyed words! Sweet, but false, false! They are like lulling narcotics. But after dreamy delight comes the reaction of misery. That is the way with me. I feel happy sometimes—yes, very happy, and then . . . . There are two creatures within me, which

are always torturing each other: the one cold, self-analyzing, calculating; the other impulsive, variable, daring. You know both. I read in some book the other day that this dual temperament is characteristic of the Russian type. There again, you see, is an instance of our subjection to forces beyond the control of our will. But this is not the place, and we are not the kind of people to discuss metaphysics. For us life is too real." Nadine rose and advanced a few steps. "Mrs. Dormer," she said, "do you think that I may venture to ask for some roses to wear this evening, or is your gardener a tyrant?"

"I have no doubt, my dear, that he will be a slave to you. But as Dr. Bramwell is the old man's especial favourite, I advise you to take him with you."

Nadine turned to her lover and gave him her hand, smiling bewitchingly.

"You have come from Alston to-day? And have you seen papa?" she asked. "Now you must tell me all about the dear old man, and whether he is a cripple still, and how Dr. Hervey consoles him for my absence. And have you brought the book of glees I told them to send by you? Mrs. Dormer, I have made a discovery. Colonel Halkett has really a charming voice; but Mrs. Bartelotte's passion for poker has demoralized him to such an extent that anything so innocent as music has no attraction for him."

"Well," said Mrs. Bartelotte with a grimace, "I call that rough upon my morals, considering that it was Colonel Halkett who first persuaded me into gambling at Monte

Carlo. I have been a hardened woman ever since."

Dr. Bramwell's heart bounded as he followed Miss Senguin to the greenhouse, but their *tête-à-tête* hardly answered to his expectations. She chattered incessantly the whole time they were together, but upon indifferent subjects, interlarding her inquiries about Alston matters with amusing anecdotes of Mrs. Bartelotte, Deodatus Lumley, and others of the Croxham visitors. He marvelled within himself at the transformation her spirits had undergone; but, true to his compact, refrained from any allusions which might render their talk dangerously personal. He was vaguely disquieted by the air of coquetry that he now perceived in her. To his mind she was more lovable in her impulsive, self-upbraiding

moods. But never had she appeared more beautiful; every motion was instinct with grace; her dress, even to the most minute detail, was studied; her lips parted almost languorously; her eyes by turns melted with tenderness and sparkled with vivacity; her expression was never for two minutes alike, yet all the while she presented the same vivid and harmonious identity. She bewitched him to a greater degree, yet not quite in her former fashion. The fascination was more unwholesome; it excited him and yet deepened his melancholy.

When they returned to the house it was found that most of the party had adjourned to the billiard-room. Dr. Bramwell felt himself out of place in the atmosphere of gaiety and badinage. Nadine threw herself

with animation into some bantering talk, to which he did not possess the key, and he betook himself to Mrs. Dormer, who did not add to his happiness by her free and unsuspicious relation of Miss Senguin's triumphs. Mrs. Dormer was a woman of fashion, far removed from prudishness, who took life as she found it, and was too cynical, possibly too deep of nature, to be vain. It amused her to chaperone a new beauty, and she had a curiosity to observe how Nadine would deal with the ball that lay at her feet.

Dr. Bramwell's vague feeling of dissatisfaction did not decrease during the evening, and he had still the sensation of being out of the swing of proceedings. Nadine descended, lovely in black velvet, with tea roses at her breast, and was soon the object of universal

attention. Dr. Bramwell's consolation, that she had given him the bud which he wore in his button-hole, was counteracted when he perceived that Colonel Halkett was similarly decorated; but he again derived comfort from the recollection of Mr. Senguin's story. The man whose mad wife was still living could not be Nadine's suitor.

He had hoped that it might fall to his lot to take Miss Senguin in to dinner, but fate, or Mrs. Dormer, had ordained otherwise. She was given to a stripling lord, one of the country neighbours; and to Dr. Bramwell was awarded Miss Curtis, who, handsome and stolid, principally confined herself to the discussion of an elaborate repast.

Upon his other side was a travelled, rather blue, old-young lady, whose proclivities were

literary and artistic, and who dabbled in shallow science, but who, fearful of committing herself, did not venture beyond safe generalities. She had read an article in one of the magazines upon Dr. Bramwell's theories concerning nerve function and nerve organization; and though retaining but a misty notion of his special claim to honour, was alive to the advantages of acquaintanceship with a man likely to become famous. Miss Beauchamp had a great deal to say upon most subjects, and attacked Dr. Bramwell from various points, but without striking success. Sara Bernhardt and the French plays; the private view at Burlington House; modern literature; M. Pasteur's discoveries; and finally, *àpropos* of Caro and *Le monde ou l'on s'ennuie,* prettily dressed latter-day

philosophy, — all fell flat. Dr. Bramwell, catching sight of Nadine some little way down the table, her fine face shadowed by a drooping frond of fern, her eyes fixed intently upon him in a gaze half-melancholy, half-beseeching, listened inattentively to the remarks of his erudite neighbour.

"People talk of Germany as the home of scepticism, but we English outrun the Germans in our materialism. Germans cannot be rationalists; they are essentially theists; none have ever denied the existence of the soul. Have you studied Descartes, Dr. Bramwell?"

Dr. Bramwell answered at random, hitting the mark.

"Are you alluding to French or German philosophy?"

"Gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Bartelotte

across the table. "I shall never ask you to come and see me in London, Dr. Bramwell, if that is the kind of light conversation you indulge in. I'm as ignorant as a typical country woman whom I met at Nice; she thought Tauchnitz a very good author, but was surprised that the foreign libraries had so many of his works."

"Ah!" sighed Miss Curtis, who had caught only the word Nice, "we used to breakfast sometimes at the Réserve. The *bouillabaisse* is so excellent."

Miss Senguin smiled from the distance in a manner that implied intimate understanding. A warm glow suffused Dr. Bramwell's soul, which had been cold and hungry for some definite sign of her regard. He plunged into a wild dissertation upon the Cartesian system.

This had at least the happy effect of alarming his philosophical interlocutor, and she was glad to withdraw from these deep waters to the comparative shallows of Wagnerian music.

Dr. Bramwell determined to seek Nadine later, and at all hazards to try and draw her into confidential talk. But alas for his chances of private conference with this enigmatic lady whom he loved! After dinner his host, full of kindly but misplaced interest, led him aside to ask innumerable questions about the London life which he intended to embrace. Did not Croxham feel justifiable pride in its doctor who had already achieved celebrity? And when Dr. Bramwell was able to escape from Mr. Dormer he found that Miss Senguin had seated herself at the card-table, and was banking with Colonel Halkett.

CHAPTER III.

THE HISSING OF SERPENTS.

It is a pleasant sensation to be seated on a well-appointed drag, beside one of the best whips in England, and behind a team of spanking horses which you are certain will not be eclipsed by any in the coaching enclosure. Nadine Senguin, abstract and emotional as she sometimes appeared, was by no means insusceptible to these material considerations. Contrary to Mr. Deodatus Lumley's vaticinations, there was no east wind, she was *not* beside the wrong person, and

in all the consciousness of beauty enhanced by a becoming toilette, she felt herself in excellent spirits. Apart too from any peculiarly private feelings, there was a scarcely-defined sense of gratification in the reflection that her charioteer, Colonel Halkett, to whom Mr. Dormer had yielded the reins, was a man of fashion, whose attentions might almost be considered the hall-mark of social success.

The seat of honour had by common consent been allotted to Miss Senguin. She was to be the new 'beauty,' and had already begun to taste some of the sweets which that distinction confers. The elder married ladies, with their appointed squires, had preferred going comfortably by train to the long drive and chance of taking cold; and Mrs. Bartelotte, determined on no account to desert Mr

Ormthwaite, whose education she had taken in hand, and whom she had resolved to inspire with a taste for dissipation more piquant than fox-hunting, sat with that gentleman behind; the other seats were filled by the younger and more spirited of the guests at Croxham, including, though he could hardly be classed with them, Dr. Bramwell.

He, placed to the left of Mrs. Bartelotte, had ample opportunity for observing the demeanour of Miss Senguin, and could not avoid hearing scraps of the conversation which she carried on with Colonel Halkett.

It was frivolous enough, certainly not of a kind to arouse jealousy; but it seemed to Bramwell that the voices of both rang artificially, and their talk was emphasized by gestures implying a certain nameless

familiarity, and by quickly averted glances charged with some subtle current of thought which he could not divine, but which set his brain working in conjecture, hateful to himself, and degrading to the goddess who still sat enthroned in his imagination.

Yet in spite of the smiling radiance of Nadine's face, it wore an expression more in harmony with this vein of thought than with the mental vision of her which Bramwell cherished. Can change of feature be wrought in a week? Could it be possible that the lips had shaped themselves into fuller curves, and that the eyelids had acquired a trick of voluptuous drooping and of sudden, coquettish uplifting of fringed lashes? Surely this was not the girl who had played Schumann to him in the Alston drawing-room so short a

time ago! Dreams! Were all his hopes baseless? and did Nadine's purity of mind and grace of character exist only in his fancy?

No, a thousand times! Not for an instant would he admit the bare suggestion.

Chollerton, though comparatively a small race meeting, is one of the most popular in England. Upon this occasion, royalty was represented; the great houses in the neighbourhood had sent forth large parties, and many well-known London faces smiled from the grand stand and from the tops of the drags in the four-in-hand enclosure. Hundreds of opera-glasses were levelled at the dark green coach, with its well-dressed freight and team of handsome bays, and whispers of admiration ran down the row as Colonel

Halkett swept smoothly in at the opening and took up his position in line with the rest.

To court the gaze of a thousand eyes is part of the programme of a race day. To simulate enjoyment, if not to experience it, a social necessity. Kill-joy faces are an insult to the pleasure-seekers, who, not having yet lost their money, ready to skim the cream of sport and pleasure, and anticipating a profitable if brief future of agreeable possibilities, are as fresh as the ladies' toilettes and the jockeys' colours.

But Bramwell in nowise fulfilled these conditions. It is one of the misfortunes of a doctor's profession that in it he is trained to peer below the surface of life, and that in whatever situation he finds himself, the earnest student must be oppressed by a sense

of incongruity and of want of harmony between the frothy exterior and the human interests and passions that surge below. This feeling was intensified tenfold in Dr. Bramwell to-day. The garish display, the forced laughter, the artificial excitement, the element of coarseness and sensuality, which if not disagreeably obtruded in the fashionable crowd, was painfully manifest in the mob pressing against the enclosure, awakened in him a keen sensation of disgust. Were those painted gaudy creatures, whose trade was written upon their faces, of the same mould as Nadine? It seemed to him desecration of his ideal that she should, as was apparent, lend herself heart and soul to the spirit of such a scene as this.

The party divided. Some joined Mrs.

Dormer in the grand stand; others remained on the drag to watch the horses being led out for the first race. Nadine, her face flushed and eager, surveyed the course from her position of vantage in front, while Colonel Halkett held her parasol and adjusted the focus of her field-glass.

In her excitement she placed her hand upon his arm; their faces were close together.

Bramwell could not then account for the repulsion which their attitude aroused in his mind. He leaned forward and asked if she would accompany him to the saddling paddock.

Colonel Halkett shot at him a brief, bright glance, and bit the end of his tawny moustache. For a second Nadine appeared to hesitate, then said with a light laugh—

"Not now. At this moment my thoughts are concentrated on cold chicken and champagne. Later on, Dr. Bramwell, you may take me to the paddock; and in the meantime, if you want to earn my eternal gratitude, go across to the Stand and remind Mrs. Dormer, when the race is over, that there are hungry souls here dying for luncheon. Colonel Halkett, the race after this one is for the Cup, isn't it? I am glad that we shall be well-fortified before it comes off. I stand to win or lose six dozen pairs of Swedish kid gloves on Miss Mary; and you?"

Colonel Halkett laughed a little unsteadily.

"More than I like to think of before luncheon, Miss Senguin;" and then, bending towards her, he whispered something in a

low tone, at which her face became set and white, and she glanced round uneasily.

But Dr. Bramwell had left the drag and was on his way to the Stand. There Mrs. Dormer, smiling but inaccessible, was exchanging greetings with London friends. The place seemed all a flutter of feminine drapery and a buzz of chatter. Pretty women fingered dainty *lorgnettes* and toyed with lace parasols; goddesses in nineteenth-century attire displayed a mundane eagerness over their betting-books; frisky matrons despatched their admirers upon excursions to the ring; and portly dames interchanged county civilities with bored-looking squires; while men of all types passed to and fro, blocking up the narrow gangway. One of these — muscular, fresh-complexioned, with

something of the sporting cut in his attire—accosted Bramwell as the latter was steering circumspectly towards his destination.

"Why, Julian, old fellow! Is it you? What ages since we met! This puts me in mind of the old days at Cambridge, when you were a front rank man with the Fitz-William, and a successful performer at Cottenham. I fancied that you had eschewed athletics, sport, fashion, and all the rest of it, to become a medical great gun. I read a paragraph about you in one of the papers the other day — madness, hydrophobia, or something equally horrible and incurable, traced to insects . . . . Everything *is* traced to insects now-a-days. Mortality in grouse, agricultural depression, consumption, and Egyptian difficulties. Where are you staying?"

"With the Dormers at Croxham."

"In the same house with that pretty Miss Senguin, of the queer Russian name, about whom every one is talking, and who is flirting so outrageously with Halkett! I envy you your opportunities of studying the colour of her eyes. I have a bet with Yorke on the subject. He says they're grey; I back them for green. You can't help me, I suppose? I shall put the case to Harry Dormer, and get him to introduce me."

Disgusted and sore, Dr. Bramwell pressed on; but the crowd thickened, and presently he came to a standstill beside the first row of chairs. A striking-looking lady, one of the freest and fastest of the fashionable set of married women, stood with her profile

towards him, talking in perfectly audible tones to a gentleman upon her left.

"You know the ins and outs of Colonel Jack's little affairs," she was saying. "I have been hearing all kinds of naughty things about him lately. They say that he made desperate love in the winter to that pretty Miss Senguin, who is beside him on Harry Dormer's drag opposite. Clem Bartelotte, who went about with them a good deal, was the first to tell her that horrid story of Mrs. Jack and the madhouse. Really, there should be a law allowing men to divorce insane wives. Clem said—you know her quaint way —'Well, I should say it *was* just a crusher; but that was not my business. My dear woman! romance and high falutin' arn't in my line; they take a deal too much out of the

nervous system; but I guess there was a pretty powerful eruption in that quarter. *She* kept her room for a week, and *he* went off all of a sudden to Paris.' That's the way of the world," added the lady. "Women when they are hard hit send for their doctor, and men—go to Paris. But this is a lame conclusion to the tragedy. There they are, apparently excellent friends, with what seems to be a remarkably tasty luncheon spread out behind them; and I'm bound to say that neither hero or heroine give one the idea of being victims to hopeless passion. How has Colonel Jack settled matters?"

"Oh, Halkett has a genius for Platonism."

The lady laughed.

"Platonism answers admirably with married women, but it don't do in the case of pretty

young ladies. Colonel Halkett is wise in his generation. He will teach Miss Senguin nineteenth century morality; and seeing that he cannot keep her for himself, will magnanimously hand her over to an unexceptionable *parti.*"

"With all rights reserved! Look, here come the horses; and Potboy is nowhere. You are in for a pony, Lady Alsager."

Dr. Bramwell moved away, borne on by the crush downwards to the course. The shouting of the crowd, the yells of the bookmakers, the buzz of exclamation, the *frou-frou* of silk in the Stand, all mingled confusedly in his ears like the roar of distant thunder. His brain whirled. Escaping from the throng of well-dressed people, he wandered aimlessly among the motley mob

outside the ropes, past spangled dancing-girls, clowns, tumblers, sword-swallowers, booths placarded with announcements of 'Bodiless ladies,' 'Mammoth children,' 'Wonders of the World,' besieged every now and then by hoarse entreaties that he would buy, a donkey that swallowed pence, a rosebud for his sweetheart, a pure-bred Skye terrier, a box of lucifers, "for the love of God, and to save a penniless widow and children from starvation"—sickening sights and sounds that chimed in a horrible incongruous fashion with the ghastly misgivings that rose in his mind. His former vague doubts assumed shape now, and appeared to mock at him like gibbering fiends. A lurid light seemed thrown upon his mental image of Nadine. Her wild words, conflicting impulses, wayward moods, and

occasional fixed look of misery, might be interpreted by the key of passionate, unavailing desire. . . . Yet, was it conceivable that tragic yearning could mask itself beneath a demeanour at times so frivolous? If Lady Alsager's story were true,—Bramwell shuddered at the thought of his darling's name the subject of shameful innuendo and vulgar gossip,—he marvelled at the self-command which enabled Nadine to support such agony as, under the circumstances, this false-seeming intercourse at Croxham must imply; or had she fallen so thoroughly into the spirit of the age, that to enact the part of heroine in a nineteenth-century drama, involving the sacrifice of maidenly instinct, and the torture of her most sacred emotions, against such a background as now presented

itself, cost her no more than a passing pang?

When Dr. Bramwell returned to the enclosure the ostentatious business of luncheon was in progress. Every drag had mounted its white table-cloth, upon which glass and silver glittered, aspic jelly quivered, and lobsters and forced strawberries made brilliant spots of colour. Each repast seemed to vie with the other in a display of seasonable and unseasonable dainties. Champagne corks were flying, and there was a rattle of laughter and light talk. The Dormers' party had been reinforced from the Stand. Mrs. Bartelotte had discovered an old admirer, and was not sorry to have an opportunity of piquing Mr. Ormthwaite, who, she declared, was neglecting her shamefully, and whom she rallied

unmercifully upon his preference for the saddling-paddock and the ring. Miss Curtis, her glass frequently replenished by the attentive diplomatist, was serenely enjoying her luncheon, and contributing but little to the general hilarity. Deodatus Lumley, Mr. Bartelotte, and Miss Beauchamp, the travelled young lady who owned a weakness for improving society, had secured a pigeon pie, a dish of cold cutlets, and a bottle of champagne between them, and were enlivening the more serious business of the collation by a discussion upon Eastern mysticism. Colonel Halkett had withdrawn from Nadine's side, and was ministering to the wants of a London beauty, whom Harry Dormer had borne triumphantly across from the Stand, and two young guardsmen leaned over Miss Senguin,

who consumed lobster salad with a satisfaction as placid as that evinced by the heiress.

Luncheon was barely over when the horses came out for the Cup race. As it was for two miles, Colonel Halkett suggested a walk to the starting-point. The party divided again. Nadine, piloted by Colonel Halkett, moved on ahead, and Mrs. Bartelotte fell, for the time being, to Dr. Bramwell. She called him to task for his moody manner, and requested that if he had any more new theories about diseases and such-like horrid matters, he would ponder them in his consulting-room, and not on a racecourse.

"I detest doctors," she remarked, with her usual frankness. "If you weren't so charming, upon occasions, and if every one didn't say you were going to be another Harvey or

Jenner, I should have nothing to say to you. But come now, I don't believe it's science that is absorbing you. You seem dreadfully out of sorts. If my husband looked as glum as you do I should just suspect that he had backed Potboy to a pretty considerable amount; and my deduction from that would be domestic squalls, and a row over my milliner's bill. But betting isn't your weakness. H'm, I know what is. Don't you think that I've lived all these years in the world for nothing! You should not let a married man run off with your young lady. There *is* a wife in the background, though, perhaps, you aren't aware of the fact. Few people are. Confess. Aren't you dying to be in Colonel Halkett's shoes at this present moment?"

"No," answered Bramwell, mastering himself with a great effort, "for if the state of his heart is what you suppose it to be, neither his position or his feelings can be at all enviable."

Mrs. Bartelotte shrugged her shoulders with pretty affectation.

"You look down from a pedestal upon the world in general. I thought that the impossibility of marriage was the crowning attraction of being in love. Anyhow, that's what erotic philosophers tell us. We treat our passions kindly in real life, Dr. Bramwell; it's only in novels that they are torn to tatters. But unless I'm greatly mistaken, Colonel Jack has other fish to fry to-day besides sentimental ones; and if Miss Mary does not run up to her form for the Cup he

will go back to Croxham a sadder and a poorer man. I'm immensely curious about the result of this race from a psychological as well as a pecuniary point of view, though I know that you won't sympathize with me, for you have a sovereign contempt for everything that is interesting and uncanny."

"By no manner of means, Mrs. Bartelotte, for *you* are interesting, though I hope you are not uncanny."

Bramwell could have jeered at himself as he uttered the bald compliment.

"Well, I guess you are getting on," said Mrs. Bartelotte approvingly. "At this rate, and by dint of practising on me, you'll be a match for Colonel Halkett himself. Now let me tell you, though I must say it sounds very silly, Mr. Ormthwaite has had a dream about

the winner of the Cup, which he confided to me on the drag coming here. You wouldn't take him for a Joseph, would you? but it doesn't do to judge by appearances. He dreamed last night that the race was won by an outsider—out of the betting altogether—called Abatos."

They had reached the starting-place, and Colonel Halkett, who had caught Mrs. Bartelotte's last words, turned laughingly round.

"I wouldn't advise you to lay long odds against Miss Mary, Mrs. Bartelotte, on the strength of Jem Ormthwaite's prophetic vision. He was heard to declare last night that curried prawns invariably gave him the nightmare; and I can vouch for three brandies and sodas in the smoking-room. Allah is great, but Jem Ormthwaite is not his prophet.

Besides, there isn't a horse of that outlandish name on the card."

"Ah! that is just where the dream begins to fulfil itself," cried Mrs. Bartelotte excitedly. "Lord Alsager has found out on *excellent* authority—don't smile in that jeering way, it's one of the trainers—that Bevis, the last one down on the list, was so christened, and his name had to be changed because one of the grooms being called Abbott, the horse was always known as 'Abbott's 'oss.' There! what do you say to that? I've given all my friends the straight tip, and you might have profited by my warning, Colonel Halkett, and hedged an hour ago."

Colonel Halkett laughed again.

"You and I, Mrs. Bartelotte," he said, "have the true gambler's instinct. Don't be

surprised to hear that I *have* staked my all on Abatos;" and Mrs. Bartelotte had presently to bear a considerable amount of chaff upon her development of Jem Ormthwaite's latent mystical capabilities.

The horses gathered in line; and after one or two false starts, were fairly off, Miss Mary leading. Now, set in the rush back to the Stand. Colonel Halkett's excitement was evident, in spite of his efforts to conceal it; and Mrs. Bartelotte had her private reasons for anxiety. In the *mêlée* they found themselves in advance together. Nadine Senguin, who had lingered, cast a glance, half-inviting, half-appealing, towards Dr. Bramwell. He pressed through the thin stream till he reached her side. The wave rolled on. They two were left, practically alone.

CHAPTER IV.

BEVIS WINS.

"I DON'T want to see this race," exclaimed Nadine. "I hate racing. I hate crowds and excitement. The whole thing is sickening: it is a raree-show, where we are like puppets dressed up, each with a part to act; and we must smile and pretend to be happy when our hearts are aching with pain. . . . Did you listen to Mrs. Bartelotte's story about Mr. Ormthwaite's dream? I'm beginning to believe that Croxham is an uncanny place. Last night *I* had a horrible dream. I dreamed

that I was the White Lady who haunts the long corridor, and that like her, I was doomed to perpetual unrest in expiation of some terrible crime that I had committed in the far past. On, on, up and down, pacing for ever—always weighed down by this ghastly burden of secret sin! Ah me! Do you know what it is to wake at night and to feel ghostly hands clutching you, and to strive with soul and might to escape, and then to realize that you are alone—alone—and that the spectres are your own hideous fancies and evil desires? Dr. Bramwell," she added in a quieter tone, "I suppose that there is a place near where you can buy drugs. I want you to get me something which will send me into a sound dreamless sleep—if only for one night."

Her haggard looks—for her face seemed to

have grown in a moment old and withered —and her excited words confirmed all Bramwell's torturing suspicions. His eyes fixed themselves upon her in deep, despairing solicitude. He uttered a heavy groan.

"What is it?" she asked with sudden sweetness, bending towards him, and gently touching his arm. "I make you unhappy, and I do not want to do that. I am not worth troubling about. Don't mind me; my nerves are overstrained."

"You *do* care whether I am unhappy?" he asked brusquely.

"Yes, indeed I do; it distresses me. Your face is my conscience. It has made me hate myself—hate everything around me. At luncheon you seemed to me like the skeleton at the Egyptian feast."

"Oh, Nadine!" exclaimed Dr. Bramwell impulsively; "it would be kinder far if you told me that my feelings were nothing to you."

"I know that it would," she answered sadly, "but it would not be true. Have you not often told me that truth is the one good thing? I wish to be honest—*sometimes.* I am not indifferent to you; you affect me strongly."

They stood silent for several moments. Though her voice had been knell-like, and though his better judgment assured him that his anguish and love were poured forth to no purpose, a ray of hope entered his heart.

"I am glad," he said, "that you have given me this opportunity of speaking to you, for I have something serious to say."

"I hope that this does not imply an infringement of our compact," she replied, with grave coldness.

"No; it concerns you—" He paused.

"Well! what is it?" she asked defiantly. "I am listening. But I warn you that I am not in the same mood to-day as when we talked last—a fortnight ago."

"Do I not know it? Since then you have come under another influence, and as it gains strength mine wanes. Oh, Nadine!" he cried passionately, "at this moment, I would sacrifice all my hopes for the future to possess the power of reading your thoughts. But I think that I have found a clue to them——"

"Remember," she interrupted haughtily, "I have not given you permission to say *anything* to me."

"Miss Senguin, the only right of speech that I claim, is that of one to whom your good name is sacred."

"*My good name!*" she repeated in a low voice, and coloured all over.

He had never before seen so deep a blush; throat and ears were crimson.

"Surely," he continued, "that is imperilled by the marked attentions of a man who cannot marry you!"

Nadine grew pale, slowly, as the grey tinge creeps over snow after sunset.

"What? How—" she faltered. "You have not seen or heard anything since you came to Croxham to—to give rise to such thoughts?"

"Not an hour and a half ago, I heard your relations with Colonel Halkett, possible and

impossible, discussed in the Grand Stand by Lady Alsager and one of Halkett's brother officers. It was said that you loved him, that he had won your heart,—villain that he is!—while you were unaware of the fact of his marriage, that—but I cannot repeat the slanderous insinuations."

Nadine did not immediately reply, but stood, with face downcast, meditatively raking the ground with her parasol. Presently she said, quite coldly—

"If you listen seriously to the gossip of Lady Alsager and her set you will believe a great deal that is totally untrue."

"Nevertheless," rejoined Bramwell hotly, "it is cruelly compromising to a beautiful and comparatively unprotected girl."

"I fancied," she said, with a swift glance

at his face, "that *you* were one of the few righteous men who don't measure by the standard of conventionality, and who have the courage to affirm that white-washed vice is not morality."

"There are some things," said Bramwell, hesitatingly, "in which private and conventional judgment must be identical."

She coloured again. At this moment the horses, veins quivering, flanks streaming, flew past the second time. Four were almost in a cluster, two neck and neck. It was a fine race; riders bent almost double, every nerve on the stretch, hands tense, faces grim with anxiety. The roar of voices round the Stand became hoarser and more deafening; when above the confused tumult rose the shout, "Bevis wins;" "The outsider has it." But

in spite of Nadine's assertion that she did not wish to see the race, Bramwell perceived that her frame was trembling with suppressed excitement. She moved eagerly forward and leaned over the ropes; her face changed, her colour came and went, and her eyes followed the horses with an intensity of gaze that surprised and almost shocked him. When the race was over she heaved a deep sigh, as though some inward strain had been removed. A smothered ejaculation fell from her lips. To Bramwell it seemed like an exclamation of despair. But she recovered herself in a moment, and cried gaily,—

"Jem Ormthwaite is a true prophet. The race has been run; Miss Mary has come in second. There's a triumph for the superstitious. Dr. Bramwell, does not this convert

even a hardened sceptic like you to a belief in occult forces? Happy are they who backed Abatos. Come, let us go back and congratulate the winners."

But Dr. Bramwell detained her by an appealing gesture.

"Nadine," he cried, "have you no word of comfort for me? I do not mean as regards my own hopes. Let them remain blighted and dead as though they had never blossomed. But *you!* Oh, it is your pain that makes my heart bleed. . . . To know that you are suffering, is anguish greater than I can bear. You are on dangerous ground; will you not fly from it? If Colonel Halkett has not the manliness to leave you, will you not release yourself?"

Nadine seemed deeply moved by his appeal; her eyes melted with tears, her lips trembled.

"Oh!" she began, and a sob choked her voice. . . . But a new mood seized her, and she shook herself free from emotion. "Release myself! From what? The chain of this degrading attachment?" she cried, and her tone was metallic in its hardness. "What right have you to suppose that I have any such unworthy feeling, if indeed it be unworthy to love a man whom Fate has placed beyond the pale of happy marriage. Dr. Bramwell, I could not have believed that you would take this melodramatic view of a situation, commonplace enough. Must every girl whom Colonel Halkett honours or degrades by his attentions, bear the stigma of having yielded to unlawful passion? One half of society speaks evil of the other half, and one does not hear of tragic consequences. Girls of the period are taught

early to bridle their affections. As Mrs. Bartelotte remarked the other day, 'Love resolves itself into a question of keeping a carriage.' And if Jack Halkett were free to-morrow, he is too poor and too extravagant to think of marrying—me. I have a strong vein of worldliness in my composition, and am inclined to philosophize on life; the first axioms of my creed are—nothing matters, nobody cares. Ah, I am ungrateful to say that; no one cares—except *you*, and you only make yourself unhappy by doing so. Try to dismiss all these fancies from your mind. I wish it to be at ease. . . . Is it so—now?"

Bramwell shook his head.

She looked at him, melancholy, anxiety, and a certain repressed impatience blending in her expression.

"You know that I have a strong regard for you. It pains me deeply to think that you are troubled by false impressions about me."

"Oh, that I could believe them false! But your alternate fits of feverish gaiety and of strange depression, your vague admissions, the traces of mental tumult which I see so plainly on your face, all confirm them."

"And you call yourself a clever physician, and yet do not consider how easily a sensitive nervous system may be disordered by several wakeful nights, and the excitement of poker," rejoined Miss Senguin with a forced laugh. "I will not gamble this evening, Dr. Bramwell, but will play all your favourite music instead; it will, I hope, have a tranquillizing effect upon us both. Then you shall give me my dose of 'bottled happiness,' and

to-morrow you will find me a different person."

"You are right," said Dr. Bramwell mournfully. "Where you are concerned I have no insight, no knowledge. For you I am but a poor physician. You bewilder me. In your many moods the real *you* escapes from me. You are a mystery which my skill cannot enable me to unravel. Latterly I have become painfully conscious of this. You have made me distrust my own powers. And it is because I love you."

She stopped him with an imperative gesture.

"No, no more. Remember our compact. I do not think that you will ever know the real *me;* but the time *may* come, perhaps will come shortly, when you will regard me

with horror. If so, reflect that the woman you love *now* is in *every respect* the same as her whom you will hate *then*—in no way better or worse. Possibly virtue and vice may then seem to you mere things of comparison."

She walked on abruptly, and hindered any comment on his part upon her ambiguous words by resolutely changing the subject to inquiries concerning his Lonond practice and plans for the future.

The occupants of the drag were all in a state of excitement and self-gratulation. As Nadine and Dr. Bramwell approached, they were greeted by a volley of reproaches for having missed the race of the day. Miss Senguin received cheerful condolences for her heavy losses in gloves, and was advised to seek consolation in the good fortune of her

friends. Mrs. Bartelotte appeared radiantly triumphant. Jem Ormthwaite and Colonel Halkett were the heroes of the hour: the former, looking somewhat sheepish, was chaffed without mercy, and implored to prophesy the winner of the coming Derby; while Colonel Halkett laughingly responded to the congratulations showered upon him when it was discovered that he had actually taken Mrs. Bartelotte's advice and had backed Sir Bevis, otherwise Abatos, to such an extent that his winnings effectually placed him beyond the reproach of poverty. Though half ashamed of his recklessness, he had exhibited an interest in Miss Mary, and had thus misled the clever little American lady.

Bramwell, standing aloof and taking no part in the general felicitations upon this

extraordinary *coup*, observed a long hand-clasp and a lingering look exchanged between Colonel Halkett and Miss Senguin; but presently the former disappeared from the roof of the drag, and was no more seen till the horses were put to and the course was beginning to clear.

During the rest of the afternoon Nadine was subdued, almost melancholy, and when rallied upon her silence, could only bid her persecutors remember that she had not backed Sir Bevis. She seemed to show a wish to avoid Halkett, insisted upon Mrs. Bartelotte taking her seat in front, and placed herself beside Dr. Bramwell. Her manner to him during the drive home lost its tinge of defiance, and was gentle even to tenderness: her accents, as she conversed in the tentative abstract manner which was one of her charms,

low and suggestive; her eyes full of soft gravity. This sweetness, all in harmony with the lengthening shadows, the balmy air, and fragrance of the May-day, intoxicated Bramwell, reason notwithstanding, and thrilled him with dreamy happiness, which in turn changed to hungry longing and passionate pain.

For minutes after her hand had been released from his, when he helped her to descend from the drag, the impression of her touch lingered, and his blood tingled at the sense of imaginary contact. And her eyes when they parted seeming to beseech his pity and forbearance, stirred all his yearning, and renewed belief in her truth and the nobility of her nature.

She came down to dinner clothed in creamy white, which seemed typical of her purity, a

bunch of narcissus blown as it were upon her bosom, her face pale, with wistful eyes and gracious lips, and her dusky hair making a shadowy background to the clear brow and delicately cut features. She was allotted to Bramwell, and her appealing look and whispered entreaty, "Don't expect me to be gay and amusing this evening," seemed to establish a new claim upon his tenderness. The spell was intensified when, later on, she seated herself at the piano and played several of Heller's dreamiest *nuits blanches*, then wandered through one of Raff's symphonies, and finally, after two or three preluding chords of grand dissonance, broke into Chopin's Marche Funèbre.

The stately measure filled the room and stilled the murmur of conversation. Nadine's

eyes dilated, her small head was bent slightly backwards, her lips were parted, all her face seemed instinct with the harmony she was creating; Mrs. Bartelotte's nasal laugh sounding from the hall, where she sat commenting upon the events of the day, was the only jarring sound in the room. Colonel Halkett, to whom she had been talking, abruptly quitted her, and stood, a handsome figure, against the slightly drawn *portière*, his eyes intently fixed upon Miss Senguin. She glanced towards him; then her head drooped; she finished the march, hesitated a moment, and when all expected her to rise, struck the notes of a rippling accompaniment, lilting in measure, but pitched in a minor key, so that all through it ran a strain of sadness, and sang in a manner plaintive yet arch, this little

ballad of Edgar Allan Poe's, which she had once set to music.

"Gaily bedight,
A gallant knight,
In sunshine and in shadow,
Had journeyed long,
Singing a song,
In search of El Dorado.

"But he grew old,
This knight so bold,
And o'er his heart a shadow
Fell, as he found
No spot of ground
That looked like El Dorado.

"And as his strength
Failed him, at length
He met a pilgrim shadow.
'Shadow,' said he,
'Where can it be,
This land of El Dorado?'

"'Over the mountains
Of the moon,
Down the Valley of the Shadow,
Ride, boldly ride,'
The Shade replied,
'If you seek for El Dorado.'"

The last verse was given forth in a manner at once playful, defiant, and despairing. A moment's silence greeted its conclusion; then followed a low murmur of applause. Nadine left the piano, and presently the party began to disperse. It was getting late; no one had shown any inclination for the usual after-dinner diversions; the card-tables were deserted. The gentlemen had mostly broken up into knots; a cheerful clicking of balls sounded from the billiard-room. The elder ladies had retired, pleading fatigue; only a small party of congenial spirits remained, gathered now round the dying embers in the hall, and moved partly by Nadine's fanciful music, partly by some subtle sympathy—some indefinable current of thought which at times connects minds the most dissimilar—

fell into fugitive, informal talk, touching subjects often shrunk from in mere commonplace discussion.

Nadine, followed by Bramwell, joined the group, which already included Colonel Halkett, and seated herself in a large, carved arm-chair a little apart from the rest.

A rose-shaded crystal globe shed a subdued light upon the scene, and, after the manner of half-illumination, brought into relief upon the oak carving above the fireplace, grotesque heads and curious tracery, and showed upon the tapestry quaint mediæval figures—warriors in ill-jointed armour, mounted upon lean steeds of sickly colours, and ladies in ruffs and farthingales, contrasting strangely with the bright faces and modern toilettes to which they formed the background.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

THE BORDER-LAND OF THE INVISIBLE.

Mrs. Bartelotte, who had been admiringly contemplating the tips of her daintily shod feet and the bugles which ornamented her dress, looked up suddenly, and gave a little shiver.

"Did you ever read a story of Hans Anderson's," she remarked, "in which the dream-shadows chase each other on the wall, and invite the thoughts of the lords and ladies? I always considered that a real practical idea. Why shouldn't dreaming be cultivated as a

science? Dr. Bramwell, there's something for a clever man like you to think about. Well, I must say that I hope somebody will be prophetically inspired to-night, for at this rate I shall soon pay off all my dressmaker's bills. Mr. Dormer, I must really beg you to take care that our Joseph is not exposed this evening to coarse and antagonistic influences. I've always understood that there was a great deal in influence. I'm sure that *I've* been doing my best to elevate his soul; and I must say that I don't consider billiards and brandies and sodas, and the sort of conversation that goes on in the smoking-room after *we* are in bed, at all stimulating to the spiritual faculties. Oh, we are all becoming quite mystical. Here's Colonel Halkett, who has been holding forth about elective affinities,

moral magnetism, mysterious sympathies, *clairvoyance,* and all the rest of it, till I have begun to feel quite *squirmy.* I guess it's something in the air of the house, Mr. Dormer; and if Mr. Ormthwaite, or any one else, names the winner of the Stakes to-morrow morning, I think that the least we can do is to tender a vote of thanks to the Croxham ghosts. Now, would it be putting an insult upon your great great grandmother, if we were to call her up from the vasty deep—or rather, down from the corridor, and ask her help in regulating our betting-books?"

"I shouldn't advise you to trifle with the White Lady, Mrs. Bartelotte," replied the host, with an air of gravity. "Do you know the legend? It is said that the lover of a certain Lady of Croxham was once foully

murdered in her presence, in one of the chambers of the west wing. Since then, the story goes, whenever a guest dies at Croxham —an event, as you may imagine, of rare occurrence — footsteps and strange muffled sounds are heard in the corridor, and the phantom figure of a woman in white is seen to move slowly, and as if with difficulty, dragging behind her a shadowy, vaguely-defined form, supposed to be the body of a man. She pauses for an instant at the door of the doomed person, knocks, and disappears."

"Oh my!" cried Mrs. Bartelotte. "I reckon we'll let that ghost of your great great grandmother alone, Mr. Dormer. And, by the way, I hope none of us are going to leave our bones at Croxham. I woke up last night, or rather this morning, between three

and four o'clock, and I am certain that I heard stealthy footsteps in the corridor. I should have got up to look if I hadn't been so sleepy. See how you have frightened Miss Senguin; she is as white as though she were going to faint."

Every glance turned towards Nadine. She was leaning forward, her eyes dilated, her lips parted in an unconscious expression of fear, her face ghastly pale. Regaining composure with an evident effort, she said—

"It is nothing. I have got into the habit of sleeping badly, and such stories take hold of my nerves."

"Talking of haunted houses," said Colonel Halkett, breaking abruptly into the circle round the fire. "Have you heard the latest solution of the Carnwarth Castle mystery?

It is ingenious, if nothing else. They say that several hundreds of years ago, the wife of an Earl of Carnwarth, a lady of evil repute' popularly described as the Witch of Fife, gave birth to a monstrosity—half-toad, half-man. The longevity of the toad species is a matter of natural history. This creature, protected by the spells of his mother, the most malevolent spirit in the Castle, is the occupant of the mysterious chamber, and the rightful Earl of Carnwarth."

In the buzz of comment with which Colonel Halkett's story was received, the impression made upon Nadine by the Legend of the White Lady of Croxham was forgotten, and conversation drifted towards the subjects of apparitions, of dual existence, hallucinations, and kindred topics.

The late Lord Lytton was quoted as an exponent of the theory of AWE, and almost each member of the party had some history to relate of individual excursion into the fields of mysticism. Dr. Bramwell was assailed as a sceptic in all that appertains to the occult and transcendental. Nadine Senguin's eyes seemed to implore him to divert the current of talk from the personal channel in which it now flowed.

"Surely," said Mrs. Dormer, "you must admit the reality of certain psychological experiences common to many of us, which cannot be explained by natural law."

"Ah!" said Dr. Bramwell, smiling, "the materialist is popularly accused of arrogance and narrow-mindedness, but, in fact, quite the contrary is the case. It is the supernaturalist

who limits his belief in the operations of nature by the evidence of his own senses, and compelled to supply deficiencies, presupposes the existence of arbitrary spiritual agencies, with which reason must be more or less at variance. To the scientist who regards natural law as a continuous and ever more complex chain of cause and effect, of condition and result, the explanation of psychological phenomena by the working of physical forces, appears no more impossible and no less wonderful than the promulgation of disease by the action of germs, or the confinement of mind in grey matter.

"What is matter? Never mind. What is mind? No matter," parenthetically observed Mr. Deodatus Lumley.

"Oh dear!" sighed Mrs. Bartelotte. "Since

we are all agreed that everything is a mystery, where's the use of arguing about it? But I must tell you that I have a very poor opinion of your philosophy, Dr. Bramwell, and I think you deserve to encounter a specially malevolent ghost as a punishment for your unbelief."

"At any rate," added Mr. Dormer, "we will not be so cruel as to hope that the White Lady may pay him a visit to-night in order that he may have proof-positive of the spirit world."

"I think," said Mrs. Dormer, thoughtfully, that many curious things might be accounted for on the supposition that there is a kind of moral electricity which pervades nature and life, and under certain conditions brings people into unconscious *rapport* with each other. We know how the nerves may vibrate

like the strings of a sensitive instrument, and the mind be filled with strange fugitive fancies, unreal, yet vivid impressions, by some indefinable outward agency; the sighing of a south wind, the scent of a flower, the refrain of a song. We know the subtle sympathy which before receiving a letter from one with whom our soul has been in communion, causes us to be haunted, waking and dreaming by thoughts and images of that person. . . . This was at one time a common experience with me. . . ."

Mrs. Dormer sighed involuntarily, and a vaguely embarrassing consciousness fell upon the group. It was known to one or two intimate friends, and suspected by others, that the force of her nature had expended itself in a strong intellectual attachment to a

gentleman of rare attainments, who had died some few years before.

"I will tell you something which partly illustrates what I mean," Mrs. Dormer added, hurriedly. "As this experience is my own, you may take it honestly for what it is worth. The oddest point in it, is its total absence of point." She laughed and continued—

"You know how fond my husband is of running up to London for the day, leaving his dog-cart at Brayshill, and driving himself home, so that he is not tied by any particular arrangement. Upon the occasion to which I am referring, he went up on a day when we were expecting friends to dine and sleep, and without having inquired his plans, I had taken it for granted that he would return by the train which brought them. An hour or so

before the time at which I supposed he would arrive I was sitting at my boudoir window,—you will remember that it overlooks the back entrance,—when, glancing suddenly down, I saw Harry in the dog-cart drive round by the sweep which leads into the stable-yard and disappear within the gates. As he turned, he looked up, and laughingly shook his whip at me, while I nodded and waved my hand in return, then went on with my work; concluding, as he did not come upstairs, that he had been detained in conversation with the coachman, or had gone straight to his own study.

But when on the arrival of our guests he did not appear, and when on inquiring I found that he had not been seen, and that there was neither horse nor dog-cart in the

stable, I began to feel alarmed, though I tried to hide my anxiety, and after waiting dinner for half an hour, ordered it to be served without my husband. Just as we had finished the dog-cart *did* drive up, and Harry rushed in, full of apologies, and rather hesitatingly explained the cause of his late arrival.

"'I fully intended to come down by the train before yours,' he said to one of our guests, 'and am ashamed to confess that, having a few minutes to spare at Clapham, I went into the waiting-room and fell fast asleep on one of the settees. The extraordinary thing is, that when I awoke I could not at first divest myself of the notion that I was lying on my own sofa in the smoking-room, for I had the most singularly vivid

impression of having accomplished the journey, remembering the minutest detail, even to the fact of driving in at my back gate, and of seeing my wife at her boudoir window, shaking my whip at her, and receiving a nod and a wave of the hand in return.'

"Now," concluded Mrs. Dormer, "if anything had happened to Harry that evening the occurrence would have been considered a supernatural warning. As it is, the whole thing is motiveless, inexplicable—the fact of an apparition without its *raison d'être*."

Just then several of the billiard-players entered, and the conversation was momentarily diverted. Miss Senguin rose abruptly and addressed her hostess.

"Our talk has been extremely eerie, and I am afraid that I shall not sleep if I listen

to any more like it. Good night, dear," in a half whisper; "I don't think that I am up to 'curling paper' confidences. Mrs. Bartelotte, I hope the ghosts won't revenge themselves upon us for discussing them so lightly by whispering the name of the wrong horse in Mr. Ormthwaite's ear. Colonel Halkett, I wish you happy dreams of your good fortune. You at least have found El Dorado to-day."

As she spoke, pausing opposite him, whether by accident or design, the bunch of narcissus that she wore fell at Colonel Halkett's feet. A look was interchanged between them. Bramwell, as he held back the heavy curtain which partly veiled the staircase, observed the glance, and his heart contracted with a spasm of pain. He gave

Nadine her candle and let the curtain fall behind them.

"Have you got me my flacon of bliss?" she asked, offering him her hand.

"I have given it to your maid," he replied gravely; and added, not without a tinge of bitterness in his tone, "I hope that you will sleep well, and awaken in a more happy mood."

She gave him a look in which anger and defiance seemed to mingle.

"Oh, Nadine!" murmured Bramwell; but she shook her head with a peremptory gesture, and without another word ascended the staircase, and passed into the long corridor upon which most of the bed-rooms opened. Racked by pain and perplexity, he watched the last flutter of her white dress, then turned to encounter the rest of the

party filing out from the inner hall, Mrs. Bartelotte in advance discoursing volubly, and Colonel Halkett lingering to give some directions to the butler about being called a little earlier than usual, as he had some important letters to write before breakfast.

CHAPTER II.

THE PHANTOM IN THE CORRIDOR.

It was one o'clock when the men began to leave the smoking-room, half-past one before all sounds were hushed in the house, and Bramwell, released by his host, found himself alone in his chamber.

The potion which he had been at some pains to procure for Miss Senguin, he might with advantage have administered to himself, for never had he felt more restless or disinclined for repose. He threw himself in a large arm-chair, and remained for some time

lost in bitter and fruitless reverie, his mind working in vivid images of Nadine, which presented her by turns alluring and repellent, candid and inscrutable, and that tortured while they excited him to keener longing.

Hours passed. The stillness of the chamber was palpable, oppressive; yet there was tumult in Bramwell's soul. Hungry passion stirred in him; it was like a life within his own; it beset him; he could not be tranquil. Now he opened the window and gazed outward. A bank of ebon clouds lay heavy in the west. The wind had risen, and moaned sullenly, seeming to herald a gale. Masses of murky vapour veiled the heavens; every now and then, the moon severed them, and broke forth, a clear, full orb, gleaming pale, and imparting an unearthly radiance to the

swaying beeches and stretch of lawn, and to the grey stone walls of the wings that rose on either side of the central building where Bramwell stood. Momentarily, almost, the pallid light illuminated the scene, then all was blackness, sable folds closed; balustrade, parterre, and silvery streak of ornamental water vanished in the night.

The clock in the turret struck half-past three.

Whence came this troubled sense of presentiment and of strange, anxious expectancy, this vividness of impression and quickening of ideational and emotional activity?

Bramwell felt himself to be in an abnormal condition of brain and perception, resembling almost the recurrent fantasia and depression

produced by nervine stimulant—recognized the fact, yet was unable to assign it to any given cause save the tension of anxiety and love for Nadine, and yielded himself with hardly a struggle to the sensation of unreality, and of ripeness for any curious or psychological experience, which was stealing over him and subduing his materialism.

Minutes went on. The clock struck again —four distinct strokes, each dropping slowly like a knell. The wind had grown fiercer, and rising in mournful swell and gusty cadence, seemed the wail of approaching disaster. A deadly chilliness was borne upon the blast. Bramwell shivered and closed the window. As he did so a sudden gust extinguished the candles which had been placed lighted upon his dressing-table. Save for a

feeble glow shed by the dying fire, the room was in darkness.

He groped for matches, but uncertainly. The room appeared full of shadows. A fitful flame leaped up, and died, and leaped again. He paused. . . . Hark! Was that a sound in the corridor, or was it the wind, or was it his own fancy? . . .

The impression of unreality deepened. He might have been thinking, feeling, listening in a dream. *Was* he in a dream? Suddenly his being became merged in one of those transitory phases of consciousness to which many persons are liable, but which *he* had never known. Scene and condition of existence were *recognized*—instantaneously, evanescently—as an experience of the past. The dim room, the dusky drapery, the moan of the blast, almost

drowning that other protracted roll which had caught his ear, the flickering flame, a streak of moonlight that fell through the aperture of an imperfectly closed shutter and defined in its milky track the pattern of carpet and shape of chair, the fantastic tumult within his brain—all seemed to have sunk at some former time into memory, and to have revived now with the swiftness of lightning, bearing for the second during which the *intuition* lasted, a wondrous prevision and mysterious expectancy.

And still, as in a dream, he knew that the sound—heavy, halting, muffled, as of a massive substance dragged with difficulty along some dull and unresonant surface—advanced, proceeding down the corridor, and drawing nearer to the door of his room.

Then, not in the nature of inspiration, but as if the idea had been long familiar, and were incorporate with that weird state of consciousness, the legend of the Lady of Croxham took possession of his mind; and while underlying the illusive reality, there was an incongruous sense of possible deception or hallucination, and of the necessity for maintaining composure, Bramwell, his nerves quivering, waited and listened.

The noise deepened, becoming every instant more distinct—a painful trailing, with at intervals, a pause or suggestion of spasmodic motion, as though progress were laborious; now silence; now the sound of accelerated speed, as hurried in a more intense access of energy, *IT* passed his room.

There was no ghostly signal.

At the moment, Bramwell knew not whether he himself opened the door of his chamber, or whether what he saw were a vision, created by his quickened imagination, or the phantom of a dream in which he acted, unconscious that he slept.

Before him, at the distance of a few paces, there moved in the dimness, what appeared to be the slender, white-clad form of a woman. Her shoulders were shrouded in falling hair; her face was turned sideways, her figure bent in a semi-crouching posture; while her two white hands grasped a recumbent mass, the apparently lifeless body of a man, which she half dragged, half supported, in her struggling movement towards a dim barrier that rose before her in the shape of a green baize partition dividing the long

corridor and cutting off the rooms at the further end.

Here, the shape, corporeal or incorporeal, paused. It turned, straining wildly at its burden with a gesture of seeming despair, and Bramwell discerned a white featureless mask, and the contour of neck and uplifted chin.

The corridor was almost in darkness, every lamp extinguished, the shutters barred. One window only, had by freak or inadvertence been left unclosed, and was shrouded by a swaying curtain, through which the moon, in her fitful flashes, shed a pale glimmer. Suddenly, either the draught from the opened baize door or a sharper gust of wind blew aside the heavy drapery.

A silvery ray streamed full across the

apparition, and bathed in pale phosphorescence a woman's face, — bloodless, the features transfixed by terror indescribable, the eyes wild and glassy, the lips parted,—and shone upon tense white arms and rigid fingers, upon which was the glitter of diamonds—fingers that were contracted in an agony of effort, as by a strength almost superhuman the body was hurled through the opening.

There was a swift flash, and the clang of a fallen trinket rebounding from the wall; the door closed behind the figure; the curtain swung back; the corridor was again wrapped in gloom.

A nameless horror gripped Bramwell. . . . Those lips! those eyes! Was he mad? was he dreaming? or had he gazed upon the face of Nadine Senguin? . . . . . .

With a smothered ejaculation he darted forward; but in his bewilderment and in the darkness he struck his forehead sharply against the lintel of the doorway and staggered back, for the moment almost stunned by the blow. When he had reached the baize portal, and had flung it open, nothing but blank darkness was before him.

Had the shape, woman, or phantom, disappeared into one of the rooms beyond? He tried each door in succession: all were closely fastened; no ray of light or sound of voice or movement betrayed human occupancy.

Dazed, shaken, distrustful of his very senses, Bramwell groped his way back towards his own room. As he passed the baize barrier, again the curtain was stirred, and for a second the moon shone through the opening

and caught the gleam of a quaint, heart-shaped diamond ring that lay upon the carpet. Involuntarily Bramwell stooped and picked up the ornament. Without pausing to examine it, and in the confusion of his brain hardly connecting it with the vision he had witnessed, he thrust it into his breast, gained his chamber, and there, overcome by horrible and undefinable dread, he, the man of iron nerve, the materialist, the philosopher, sank back in a stupor of semi-unconsciousness.

CHAPTER III.

THE LEGEND FULFILLED.

About half-past eight the following morning Bramwell was awakened from the troubled sleep into which he had fallen by a hurried knocking at the door of his room, and started from his chair to confront Harry Dormer, who, with his usually cheerful countenance pale and ominously grave, rushed in, exclaiming in agitated tones,—

"Bramwell, get up! You are wanted immediately. Get up, man! What! you are dressed! You have not been in bed."

Dormer scanned the haggard face, looking

even more perturbed than his own, and the disordered figure, still apparelled in evening costume.

"Good God!" he cried, "do you know anything of this terrible business?"

The room seemed to swim before Bramwell's eyes; he staggered, and his hand grasped nervously at the chair by his side. Simultaneously with Dormer's ejaculation, there rushed into his mind a clear recollection of the events of the preceding night, but whether as the remembrance of dream or of actual fact he could not tell. A hideous dread seized him icily; cold perspiration stood upon his brow. "What? . . . Who?" he stammered. But in a moment he had regained his habitual self-control, and answered composedly,—

"I know nothing. Last night I was restless and did not go to bed, but fell asleep while I sat thinking over the fire. Tell me at once what I can do. What has happened?"

"A death, the most sudden—shocking; it has utterly unnerved me. I don't know how I am to break the news to my wife. Not many minutes ago Halkett's servant came in to tell me that he had found his master lying stone dead in his bed. You can imagine the shock. I went into the room; it was all too true. You are the nearest doctor at hand. I don't suppose there is the least hope; but come quickly and examine the— See if anything can be done."

Wasting no further time in explanation, and signing to Bramwell to follow him, Dormer passed into the corridor and turned to the

left towards the baize door, which now stood open, displaying a passage equal in length to that through which they were hurrying, and with rooms opening on to it on one side. Housemaids had already been at their morning's work. The curtains were discreetly folded back; a flood of light poured through the open windows, and sunbeams danced upon the carpet. Bramwell gave an involuntary shudder as, walking now in the daylight to face a known horror, the vivid, fantastic impressions which had made the night terrible returned to him with the force of reality. He felt again that mysterious sense of prescience, heard the moaning of the wind, the muffled sound of dragging; beheld the eerie flash of moonlight, the white clad shape and Medusa-stricken face, so like and yet so

unlike that of Nadine; saw the struggling hands and strained arms as, with a strength surely transcending that of any frail girl, the ghastly burden had been drawn into the darkness beyond. Was this nightmare, or had the Lady of Croxham walked, in obedience to her doom, and delivered her supernatural warning?

Mr. Dormer turned the handle of a door not many paces beyond the baize barrier, and they entered the chamber—the only one occupied in that end of the corridor—which had been assigned to Colonel Halkett. There was in the room no appearance of disorder suggestive of violence or tragedy. The dead man's watch ticked upon the table beside a heap of notes, loose gold, and silver. A library novel lay half open, with a paper-

cutter between its leaves. The curtains of the bed were drawn, the clothes folded smoothly; while the body lay in a natural position, with its head turned sideways upon the pillow, and except for a certain rigidity of feature and tenseness of nostril and eyelid, the face might have been that of one in peaceful sleep.

Dr. Bramwell felt the still pulse, and laid his hand upon the unbeating heart, then stepped back, saying gravely—

"There is nothing to be done; he is quite dead."

Dormer turned away, struggling with an emotion of which the other showed no trace. Neither spoke for a minute or two. Strange thoughts stirred Bramwell as he stood in the dead presence of the man whom he had

believed to be his rival. At last Dormer said,—

"I must break this to my wife and to—to Nadine Senguin."

"It would be best," said Dr. Bramwell, speaking in a voice which even to himself sounded hard and unnatural, "that Mrs. Dormer should send a note to Miss Senguin's room, conveying to her gently the tidings of what has happened. The shock of public announcement would — might unnerve and distress one so sensitive and easily wrought upon."

"You are thoughtful—and right," answered Mr. Dormer. "She and the poor fellow were a great deal together. I sometimes fancied—but every one knows what Jack Halkett was; and the story of his wretched marriage was

common property. Mrs. Dormer is fond of saying that of all women in the world Nadine Senguin is the one most capable of amusing without compromising herself. Ah! that marriage was Halkett's undoing—the ruin of his life; never was there a more tender-hearted creature or better fitted for domestic happiness."

Dormer turned away and began pacing the room, while Bramwell bent in silent examination of the dead body.

"What a man to be taken off so suddenly," continued Dormer, his habitual flippant loquacity, which had been checked by the shock, again awakened, and taking the form of retrospect. "Good all round: a crack shot, the best whip in England bar one, and as straight a rider across country as ever

followed hounds. I shall never forget him, on that raking bay of his, clearing the brook at Burswell's Bottom. We shall miss him in the field this season. And what a good fellow! Men, women, and children all adored him. Heart disease, I conclude. Nobody suspected it; he, I am certain, least of all. Shall I leave you, Bramwell, or do you need any assistance?"

"No," answered Bramwell, "I would rather be alone."

"You will find me in my dressing-room. I suppose Jack's brother ought to be telegraphed for at once; and these people, or at any rate the strangers, must be got away. Good Lord! have you ever heard of such a melancholy conclusion to a racing party? and so jolly as we all were too! I've stopped the

confounded servant's chatter. You remember our chaff last night about the White Lady? Curious coincidence, wasn't it? They've got a story afloat already that a woman's figure has been seen of late gliding along the corridor about daylight in the morning. It is a case of the carcase and the eagles. Where sudden death is, there the gossips gather together. I have a sad business before me. I must go to my wife; and then there's the clearing of the house. You'll stick to us, Bramwell; I couldn't stand a night here by myself. I suppose that to-morrow there'll be the inquest. Doctor, you may think me shallow-hearted, but I declare that I'd give my right hand to have Jack Halkett alive among us again."

Dormer went away, and Bramwell was left

alone. When his examination was over he proceeded to the dressing-room of his host to deliver his report. There was no doubt as to the manner of death. Colonel Halkett had been suffering from disease of the heart of long standing, which at any moment of undue excitement or exertion might have suddenly terminated life. The only ground for surprise lay in the fact that death had taken place during sleep, and not, as might have been anticipated, in immediate consequence of mental agitation or physical effort.

There was that morning something hushed and ominous in the atmosphere at Croxham. Blinds were drawn up-stairs. Servants talked low together, and scared faces haunted the corridor. By ten o'clock most of the guests were aware that the most reckless spirit

among them upon the previous day had but a few hours since, passed into the eternal silence. Conjecture was rife; vague whispers of suicide prevailed; mysterious rumours ran through the house. Maids had each a different tale to confide to their respective mistresses. Alarm and confusion reigned; and only Mrs. Dormer's pencilled request that all would assemble as usual in the breakfast room, prevented hurried departures, and a general uncertainty in the minds of every one as to whether presence or absence were most desirable.

Great as was the shock to Mrs. Dormer, for she had been fondly attached to Jack Halkett, she bore herself bravely; stifled her grief, and resolved that the exodus of her guests should be rendered as little trying

as the unhappy circumstances would permit. Trouble on another score also assailed her mind. Her conscience, roused to activity by Harry Dormer's suggestive lamentations over the fate of his friend, accused her of having indulged a selfish, cynical curiosity and thoughtless disregard of calamitous consequences, in her encouragement of the intimacy between Halkett and Nadine. She had credited the latter with considerable callousness and worldly wisdom, her easy belief being hardly warranted by her knowledge of the girl's character; and she now felt qualms of terror as to the effect which a sudden announcement of the late tragic occurrence might possibly produce upon Nadine. In an access of womanly tenderness, weeping, her heart soft with sympathy,

Mrs. Dormer went herself to Nadine's room, nerved to meet reproaches and a display of the most heart-rending emotion. But the young girl greeted her friend calmly, and received her statement with an apparent frigidity which startled, but instead of deceiving, was a revelation to Mrs. Dormer. Nadine had by a supreme effort braced herself to the part; but she acted it too well. Her composure was unnatural. The marble quietude of her face, her dry, tearless eyes, the fixity of her look, her forced voice and measured comments, betrayed too surely the pent-up anguish which her will held in such merciless restraint. Mrs. Dormer admired and wondered at her courage, pitying her from the depths of her heart; and yet she dared not show by word or sign that her

woman's instinct had divined Nadine's secret. The girl's stoicism was a mask which might not be torn down, and at least it gave no justification for Mrs. Dormer's self-upbraiding.

That lady's tears fell freely. Nadine watched her, listening to the hysterical sobs, her own lips firmly set, the nails of her tightly-clutched fingers tearing her pretty palm, her eyes grim and defiant. But if they were dry, her heart was weeping blood. At last Mrs. Dormer roused herself and said falteringly,—

"Harry has telegraphed for Rupert Halkett. Most of these people will go away, but you, my dear, must remain of course, as we had arranged, till it is time to leave for London. Oh, I cannot bear to think of that now."

"No," answered Nadine, and her voice

sounded to herself strangely far away; "I shall return to Alston by the mid-day train. I have told my maid to make all necessary arrangements. She—I heard this first from her. I *must* go home; and you will be better without me here."

"It is not a question of that, dearest, but of what you prefer."

"I want to go home," repeated Nadine, and looked straight at Mrs. Dormer, with wild eyes like those of a stricken animal seeming to urge dumbly—"Have pity. Do not *you* know the strain of silent endurance? Let me go away and be alone with my pain."

Mrs. Dormer left the room, not imagining that Nadine would descend till she was equipped for departure; but to her surprise, when, pale and red-eyed, she took her own

place behind the urn, Miss Senguin was already seated.

Dr. Bramwell, who had come down before the rest, watched Nadine's entrance, his eyes fixed upon her with an intensity of which he was unconscious, but which was akin to the burning anxiety in his soul. She met his look, but it brought no flush to her cheek, no answering consciousness to her eyes: they seemed to gaze through and beyond him. In truth, she had reached that pitch of effort at which the mind is abstracted from all outward things, and even sensation is almost null. Nadine heard confusedly the lachrymose murmur of conversation, but her own being was removed far above the flow of that babbling current. Automatically she moved to her chair, and sat like a statue, with head erectly

poised and lips set tightly, while she toyed with her food and apparently lent her ear to Harry Dormer's disjointed and ungrammatical jeremiad upon the desolation which had come upon the house; to Mrs. Bartelotte's threnody, in which eulogium of the dead man's charms, foibles, and virtues mingled with naïve regrets that only his creditors and heirs would reap the benefit of his grand *coup* of yesterday; and to the platitudes and condolences which were being poured forth upon their hostess by the elder ladies of the party.

It seemed to Nadine that the greater number avoided speaking to her, and that with regard to her presence, their manner exhibited an elaborate and scarcely disguised affectation of unconsciousness, while all, in reality, examined her critically. There was

something grimly ludicrous in the situation that sustained her through an ordeal which not another woman present could have supported. Lax as were the morals of Croxham,—'Flirt and let flirt' being the motto of its *habitués*,—tongues had already begun to wag upon the subject of Colonel Halkett's obvious devotion to Miss Senguin. More than one speculatively-inclined person had wondered whether she would 'show up' that morning, and if so, how far her demeanour would furnish a clue to her feelings; while the sentimental ones had derived consolation for the unhappy state of affairs by the expectation of an interesting drawing-room drama.

Mrs. Bartelotte, her radiance hardly dimmed by the black gown which she had donned and

the lugubrious drawing down of her rosy lips, shot one glance across the table at Nadine, and then began to chatter, perhaps for the first time, with a serious motive for her volubility.

"I reckon that Lacedœmonian boy is beaten any way," whispered the little American to her neighbour, Mr. Deodatus Lumley. "I will say for you Britishers, that you do carry off things on this side of the water in a way that's quite astonishing."

Mr. Lumley blinked his blue eyes and bent his sandy brows in abstracted contemplation of the beauty of stoicism. He too had his theories founded upon social observations and the study of chiromancy; but he was sympathetic, and pretended not to understand Mrs. Bartelotte's remark.

The meal was short and constrained, a mere sacrifice to conventional obligations, and an exemplification of the insular maxim—"Let everything be done decently and in order." The black shadow up-stairs seemed to have descended and to hover over the assembly. All were painfully conscious of the presence of death; all wished to escape as speedily as possible from the vicinity of that dread spectre which stalks even amid scenes of gaiety. Some few were faintly aggrieved at having been cheated by untoward fate out of a day's sport or pleasure, but for the most part the guests at Croxham were too deeply awed to bestow any thoughts upon the Chollerton Races.

For Nadine each minute was a martyrdom. She made no sign; though a woman's heart

be rent in twain, to utter a cry in public is to commit treason against her womanhood; but Bramwell, who still watched her, regardless of what might be said or thought of their relations,—full of deep, anxious solicitude for her in her pain, solicitude purely unselfish, and resembling rather that of a brother than a lover, too bewildered to be conscious of aught save of her and of that hideous, undefined suspicion which poisoned present and future,—saw that her coffee choked her, saw that her face was growing every instant more death-like, and knew that unless the strain were removed for a minute she must faint or shriek.

CHAPTER IV.

CROXHAM DESERTED.

At that moment, the arrival of the post-bag created a diversion, though Mrs. Dormer, in spite of her self-command, almost broke down at the sight of a packet of letters directed to Colonel Halkett—letters, the writers of which had little imagined would never meet the eyes of him to whom they were addressed. A move was made, and Nadine escaped up-stairs. Her fly had arrived and was waiting, piled with luggage. For her too, death seemed a pestilence to be shunned; or did she, like a

wounded doe, yearn for solitude? Bramwell, longing passionately for one word, one look which might relieve the torturing anxiety by which he was racked, followed her unobserved, and saw her pass towards the west wing. In a few moments she reappeared, clad in her travelling cloak, with her hat on and her veil down. She stopped for an instant in the corridor and cast one fearful look around, not seeing Bramwell, who stood against an abutting pillar at the head of the stairs. But for his presence the long passage was empty.

Nadine threw up her veil, and Bramwell saw her face unshadowed. Never had he beheld mental agony imprinted with such distinctness upon human countenance; but only for a moment: presently it had assumed again its grey, petrified look, and he could

almost have doubted his own eyesight. She hurried towards the baize door, her head bent, her steps unfaltering, as though she were impelled onwards by a force outside herself. Having gained the partition, she hesitated. Her hand was outstretched, then withdrawn. Despairing resolve seemed to enter into her, and she turned deliberately back. It was the crowning act of her crucifixion of passion.

Bramwell advanced to meet her, in his eagerness stretching forth his arms; but she swept swiftly past him, vouchsafing him not a look. Her veil was again lowered, but he could see that her white teeth pressed into her lips with a force sufficient to draw blood.

"Miss Senguin," he said, "may I speak

to you a moment?" then added in a tone of sharp entreaty, "Nadine, I *must* speak to you."

She paused on the stairs till he had reached her side, then moved a step or two till they stood upon the half-way landing. Some one was ascending, and below in the hall was a knot of ladies conversing in whispers, their eyes directed upwards. Bramwell divined the instinct which had prompted her to evade him in the corridor. She feared self-betrayal. The dual nature was warring within her. She had called him her conscience. He felt with something like triumph, that to him, in wavering, inconsistency, or defiance, she *must* be true. There was comfort in the reflection. But the same subtle intention bore conviction of her passionate attach-

ment to Halkett and of the hopelessness of his own love. His thoughts and emotions rose and fell like the waves of a troubled sea, agonized certainty, succeeded by reactionary doubt. Yet it seemed to him that in this moment of mental renunciation he read her complex character more clearly than ever before. After the flash of comprehension came darkness; but it left irritated resolve. She might never be his; but suspicion, which perhaps wronged her, must either be confirmed or rooted from his mind.

"I have something that I must say to you," he said, his voice trembling with earnestness.

"This is not the time. I am on the point of going away. Do not delay me."

"Nadine," exclaimed Bramwell passion-

ately, "you wish to evade me; but I will force you to listen to me. You have minutes to spare. And in the face of such a tragedy as this, of what consequence is it to you where you are or what you do, unless indeed you could be alone? You know that if, instead of being taken to Alston, you were to-day conveyed to the Land's End, the relief to you would be intense. There you would be free from the observation of familiar eyes, and might relax the strain under which you have placed yourself. At home there will still be the necessity for sustaining your part. Have you considered that this cannot last? Sooner or later you must break down."

"What can I do? Ah me!" Her hands dropped helplessly. She was momentarily

subdued by his firm tone of mastery. "I'm a brave woman. I can bear a sword-thrust without wincing; but—it's pulling out the weapon that's worst."

"Let me take you back to Alston," he pleaded. "At least I can watch over you, divert your father's attention from you—make your trial easier. You once vaguely promised me your confidence; give it to me now. You owe it me. I am tortured by the most hideous uncertainty. There is a mystery which must be cleared up. For your own sake, even more than for mine, I implore you to be open with me."

Nadine drew herself up, her momentary weakness conquered. She answered unfalteringly, though she held her eyes averted—

"I forbid you to come to Alston, or to

question me any further. Whatever your perplexities may be, you must solve them, or submit to them without appeal to me. There is no mystery, except in your imagination. I admit nothing except indeed that I am unhappy. You are too able a physician not to interpret the signs of pain. I can deceive others, I cannot deceive *you*. But my sorrow is not deeply rooted. I know myself far better than you know me. In a month it will have passed away. That I should suffer from this shock is natural, is it not? Does not Mrs. Dormer mourn? But she has the privilege of grieving openly; *I* must stifle my emotions because I am a girl, and defenceless—and already my feelings have been made the subject of common talk. Have you forgotten what you told me on the

race-course yesterday? Oh, yes, I do well to wear a mask; but it will not be necessary for long. I shall soon show an indifferent face like the rest—soon be able to boast an indifferent heart."

All this had been uttered in low, rapid tones, with no sign of feeling. She would have passed on, but Bramwell detained her.

"*When* may I see you?"

"When? How can I tell? Remember that I have forbidden you to come to Alston. Wait till I am with the Dormers in London."

"They will go to London! And you . . . you will laugh, dance, jest."

"Yes, laugh, dance, jest," she interrupted, a smile playing about her lips after the manner in which phosphorescent light might illuminate the face of a corpse; go

to Hurlingham and Ascot, and dine at the Orleans, and spend idyllic Sundays, on the river, parade the Park, struggle for invitations to smart houses, and count myself blest if an Exalted Being remarks me approvingly, or if my looks are commented upon in a society paper; be Lady Beauty here and Lady Gaiety there, and never, never Miss Melancholy. Amusement by day, chloral by night. You don't know your world, Dr. Bramwell. Do fashionable women stay at home and put on sackcloth because a friend has died suddenly?"

Her artificial manner, the little laugh which closed her speech, acted upon Bramwell like an electric shock. He started back with a gesture of shrinking, almost of aversion. Her defiant insensibility

maddened him. Was she, after all, as cold-blooded as she wished him to assume? He had faced his own disappointment, and could endure the sickening pangs it inflicted; but with keener suffering rose all the more strongly passionate need for belief in her. That he should have misunderstood her might be pain; that she should show herself unwomanly was despair. He resented the hardness that belied his conception of her nature, even though it might perhaps be interpreted on his own part as ground for renewed hope. Her next words deepened the sense of repulsion. She was looking away from him. In this obstinate avoidance of his eyes—he knew that they were charged with such solemn entreaty as must compel sincerity—lay his justification for faith.

"You begin to read my nature rightly at last. You see that I am thoroughly heartless—completely unworthy of your regard. Be it so, I have wished all along that you should understand me. I will not accept esteem that is based upon a false estimate of my character. Think of me as far more despicable than you even now imagine; and leave me — to fight my own battle with the world and with myself."

She quitted him without glance or hand touch. A moment later she was in the hall kissing Mrs. Dormer, and with the same impassive face bidding farewell to her host, while she uttered some commonplace phrases of thanks and regret. Bramwell held aloof, and made no further attempt to obtain from her any elucidation of the mystery which

tormented him. Heart-sick and weary he turned away. . . The fly drove off. . . She was gone.

By noon all the guests had departed from Croxham with the exception of Dr. Bramwell, whose presence at the Coroner's Inquest was rendered necessary by his examination of the body after death.

Life seemed to him that day a dream within a dream. In movement or rest, in silence or speech, he was haunted by the image of Nadine, not as he had seen her face last on the staircase, pale and coldly defiant, but as it had appeared to him in the corridor during that weird flash of moonlight—spectral, ghastly as the face of one struck by a horror worse than death—murder, or shame! Yet how reconcile the one with

his medical knowledge, the other with his unalterable conviction of Nadine's purity?

Had he then been the sport of an overwrought imagination?

Crushed down by the burden of these thoughts, he was that evening languidly dressing for the melancholy meal which awaited him down-stairs, in grim contrast with the noisy repasts of the previous nights, when his attention was attracted by something glittering upon his dressing-table, and upon examination found that the gleam proceeded from a heart-shaped cluster of brilliants.

It was the ring which he had picked up in the corridor, and which, in his bewilderment and agitation, he had thrust into his breast and had forgotten.

Here was confirmation of his most torturing suspicions.

Many times, while bending over Nadine Senguin as she played to him in the drawing-room at Alston, Bramwell's eyes had lingered upon the cluster of diamonds that had been wont to adorn the little finger of her left hand.

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